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ON THE CROQUET LAWN.

THE

BRAMLEIGHS

OF

BISHOP'S FOLLY

BY

CHARLES LEVER

AUTHOR OF "CHARLES O'MALLEY"

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

30046

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS

THE BROADWAY, LUDGATE

NEW YORK: 416, BROOME STREET

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WOODFALL AND KINDER,
MILFORD LANE, STRAND, W.C.

A1
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V.21

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THE

BRAMLEIGHS OF BISHOP'S FOLLY.

CHAPTER I.

THE BISHOP'S FOLLY.

Towards the close of the last century there was a very remarkable man, Bishop of Down, in Ireland: a Liberal in politics, in an age when Liberalism lay close on the confines of disloyalty; splendidly hospitable, at a period when hospitality verged on utter recklessness; he carried all his opinions to extremes. He had great taste, which had been cultivated by foreign travel, and having an ample fortune, was able to indulge in many whims and caprices, by which some were led to doubt of his sanity; but others, who judged him better, ascribed them to the self-indulgence of a man out of harmony with his time, and contemptuously indifferent to what the world might say of him.

He had passed many years in Italy, and had formed a great attachment to that country. He liked the people and their mode of life; he liked the old cities, so rich in art treasures and so teeming with associations of a picturesque past; and he especially liked their villa architecture, which seemed so essentially suited to a grand and costly style of living. The great reception-rooms, spacious and lofty; the ample antechambers, made for crowds of attendants; and the stairs wide enough for even equipages to ascend them. No more striking illustration of his capricious turn of mind need be given than the fact that it was his pleasure to build one of these magnificent edifices in an Irish county!—a

costly whim, obliging him to bring over from Italy a whole troop of stucco-men and painters, men skilled in fresco-work and carving—an extravagance on which he spent thousands. Nor did he live to witness the completion of his splendid mansion.

After his death the building gradually fell into decay. His heirs, not improbably, little caring for a project which had engulfed so large a share of their fortune, made no efforts to arrest the destroying influences of time and climate, and "Bishop's Folly"—for such was the name given to it by the country-people—soon became a ruin. In some places the roof had fallen in, the doors and windows had all been carried away by the peasants, and in many a cabin or humble shealing in the county around slabs of coloured marble or fragments of costly carving might be met with, over which the skill of a cunning workman had been bestowed for days long. The mansion stood on the side of a mountain which sloped gradually to the sea. The demesne, well wooded, but with young timber, was beautifully varied in surface, one deep glen running, as it were, from the very base of the house to the beach, and showing glimpses, through the trees, of a bright and rapid river tumbling onward to the sea. Seen in its dilapidation and decay, the aspect of the place was dreary and depressing, and led many to wonder how the bishop could ever have selected such a spot; for it was not only placed in the midst of a wild mountain region, but many miles away from anything that could be called a neighbourhood. But the same haughty defiance he gave the world in other things urged him here to show that he cared little for the judgments which might be passed upon him, or even for the circumstances which would have influenced other men. "When it is my pleasure to receive company, I shall have my house full no matter where I live," was his haughty speech, and certainly the whole character of his life went to confirm his words.

Some question of disputed title, after the bishop's death, threw the estate into Chancery, and so it remained till, by the operation of the new law touching encumbered property, it became marketable, and was purchased by a rich London banker, who had declared his intention of coming to live upon it.

That any one rich enough to buy such a property, able to restore such a costly house, and maintain a style of living proportionate to its pretensions, should come to reside in the

solitude and obscurity of an Irish county, seemed all but impossible, and when the matter became assured by the visit of a well-known architect, and afterwards by the arrival of a troop of workmen, the puzzle then became to guess how it chanced that the great head of a rich banking firm, the chairman of this, the director of that, the promoter of Heaven knows what scores of industrial schemes for fortune, should withdraw from the great bustle of life to accept an existence of complete oblivion.

In the little village of Portshandon—which straggled along the beach, and where, with a few exceptions, none but fishermen and their families lived—this question was hotly debated; an old half-pay lieutenant, who by courtesy was called Captain, being at the head of those who first denied the possibility of the Bramleighs coming at all, and when that matter was removed beyond a doubt, next taking his stand on the fact that nothing short of some disaster in fortune, or some aspersion on character, could ever have driven a man out of the great world to finish his days in the exile of Ireland.

"I suppose you'll give in at last, Captain Craufurd," said Mrs. Bayley, the postmistress of Portshandon, as she pointed to a pile of letters and newspapers all addressed to "Castello," and which more than quadrupled the other correspondence of the locality.

"I didn't pretend they were not coming, Mrs. Bayley," said he, in the cracked and cantankerous tone he invariably spoke in. "I simply observed that I'd be thankful for any one telling me why they were coming. That's the puzzle,—why they're coming?"

"I suppose because they like it, and they can afford it," said she, with a toss of her head.

"Like it!" cried he, in derision. "Like it! Look out of the window there beside you, Mrs. Bayley, and say, isn't it a lovely prospect, that beggarly village, and the old rotten boats, keel uppermost, with the dead fish and the oyster-shells, and the torn nets, and the dirty children? Isn't it an elegant sight after Hyde Park and the Queen's palace?"

"I never saw the Queen's palace nor the other place you talk of, but I think there's worse towns to live in than Portshandon."

"And do they think they'll make it better by calling it Castello?" said he, as with a contemptuous gesture he threw from him one of the newspapers with this address. "If they

want to think they're in Italy they ought to come down here in November with the Channel fogs sweeping up through the mountains, and the wind beating the rain against the windows. I hope they'll think they're in Naples. Why can't they call the place by the name we all know it by? It was Bishop's Folly when I was a boy, and it will be Bishop's Folly after I'm dead."

"I suppose people can call their house whatever they like? Nobody objects to your calling your place Craufurd's Lea."

"I'd like to see them object to it," cried he, fiercely. "It's Craufurd's Lea in Digge's *Survey of Down*, 1714. It's Craufurd's Lea in the *Anthologia Hibernica*, and it's down, too, in Joyce's *Irish Fisheries;* and we were Craufurds of Craufurd's Lea before one stone of that big barrack up there was laid, and maybe we'll be so after it's a ruin again."

"I hope it's not going to be a ruin any more, Captain Craufurd, all the same," said the postmistress, tartly, for she was not disposed to undervalue the increased importance the neighbourhood was about to derive from the rich family coming to live in it.

"Well, there's one thing I can tell you, Mrs. Bayley," said he, with his usual grin. "The devil a bit of Ireland they'd ever come to, if they could live in England. Mind my words, and see if they'll not come true. It's either the bank is in a bad way, or this or that company is going to smash, or it's his wife has run away, or one of the daughters married the footman;—something or other has happened, you'll see, or we would never have the honour of their distinguished company down here."

"It's a bad wind blows nobody good," said Mrs. Bayley. "It's luck for us, anyhow."

"I don't perceive the luck of it either, ma'am," said the Captain, with increased peevishness. "Chickens will be eighteenpence a couple, eggs a halfpenny apiece. I'd like to know what you'll pay for a codfish, such as I bought yesterday for fourpence?"

"It's better for them that has to sell them."

"Ay, but I'm talking of them that has to buy them, ma'am, and I'm thinking how a born gentleman with a fixed income is to compete with one of these fellows that gets his gold from California at market price, and makes more out of one morning's robbery on the Stock Exchange, than a Lieutenant-General receives after thirty year's service,"

A sharp tap at the window-pane interrupted the discussion at this critical moment, and Mrs. Bayley perceived it was Mr. Dorose, Colonel Bramleigh's valet, who had come for the letters for the great house.

"Only these, Mrs. Bayley?" said he, half contemptuously.

"Well, indeed, sir; it's a good-sized bundle after all. There's eleven letters, and about fifteen papers and two books."

"Send them all on to Brighton, Mrs. Bayley. We shall not come down here till the end of the month. Just give me the *Times*, however;" and tearing open the cover, he turned to the City article. "I hope you've nothing in Ecuadors, Mrs. Bayley? they look shaky. I'm 'hit,' too, in my Turks. I see no dividend this half." Here he leaned forward, so as to whisper in her ear, and said, "Whenever you want a snug thing, Mrs. B., you're always safe with Brazilians;" and with this he moved off, leaving the post-mistress in a flurry of shame and confusion as to what precise character of transaction his counsel applied.

"Upon my conscience, we're come to a pretty pass!" exclaimed the Captain, as, buttoning his coat, he issued forth into the street; nor was his temper much improved by finding the way blocked up by a string of carts and drays, slowly proceeding towards the great house, all loaded with furniture and kitchen utensils, and the other details of a large household. A bystander remarked that four saddle-horses had passed through at day-break, and one of the grooms had said, "It was nothing to what was coming in a few days."

Two days after this, and quite unexpectedly by all, the village awoke to see a large flag waving from the flagstaff over the chief tower of Castello; and the tidings were speedily circulated that the great people had arrived. A few sceptics, determining to decide the point for themselves, set out to go up to the house; but the lodge-gate was closed, and the gatekeeper answered them from behind it, saying that no visitors were to be admitted; a small incident, in its way, but, after all, it is by small incidents that men speculate on the tastes and tempers of a new dynasty.

CHAPTER II.

LADY AUGUSTA'S LETTER.

It will save some time, both to writer and reader, while it will also serve to explain certain particulars about those we are interested in, if I give in this place a letter which was written by Lady Augusta Bramleigh, the Colonel's young wife, to a married sister at Rome. It ran thus :—

"Hanover Square, Nov. 10, 18—.

"Dearest Dorothy,—

"Here we are back in town, at a season, too, when we find ourselves the only people left; and if I wanted to make a long story of how it happens, there is the material; but it is precisely what I desire to avoid, and at the risk of being barely intelligible, I will be brief. We have left Earlshope, and, indeed, Herefordshire, for good. Our campaign there was a social failure, but just such a failure as I predicted it would and must be; and although, possibly, I might have liked to have been spared some of the mortifications we met with, I am too much pleased with the results to quarrel over the means.

"You are already in possession of what we intended by the purchase of Earlshope—how we meant to become county magnates, marry our sons and daughters to neighbouring magnates, and live as though we had been rooted to the soil for centuries. I say 'we,' my dear, because I am too good a wife to separate myself from Col. B. in all these projects; but I am fain to own that as I only saw defeat in the plan, I opposed it from the first. Here, in town, money will do anything; at least, anything that one has any right to do. There may be a set or a clique to which it will not give admission; but who wants them, who needs them?

"There's always a wonderful Van Eyck or a Memling in a Dutch town, to obtain the sight of which you have to petition the authorities, or implore the Stadtholder; but I never knew any one admit that success repaid the trouble; and the chances are that you come away from the sight fully

convinced that you have seen scores of old pictures exactly like it, and that all that could be said was, it was as brown, and as dusky, and as generally disappointing, as its fellows. So it is with these small exclusive societies. It may be a great triumph of ingenuity to pick the lock; but there's nothing in the coffer to reward it. I repeat, then, with money—and we had money—London was open to us. All the more, too, that for some years back society has taken a speculative turn; and it is nothing derogatory to find people 'to go in,' as it is called, for a good thing, in 'Turks' or 'Brazilians,' in patent fuel, or a new loan to the children of Egypt. To these, and such like, your City man and banker is esteemed a safe pilot; and you would be amused at the amount of attention Col. B. was accustomed to meet with from men who regarded themselves as immeasurably above him, and who, all question of profit apart, would have hesitated at admitting him to their acquaintance.

"I tell you all these very commonplace truths, my dear Dorothy, because they may not, indeed cannot, be such truisms to you—you, who live in a grand old city, with noble traditions, and the refinements that come transmitted from centuries of high habits; and I feel, as I write, how puzzled you will often be to follow me. London was, as I have twice said, our home; but for that very reason we could not be content with it. Earlshope, by ill luck, was for sale, and we bought it. I am afraid to tell you the height of our castle-building; but, as we were all engaged, the work went on briskly, every day adding at least a story to the edifice. We were to start as high-sheriff, then represent the county. I am not quite clear, I think we never settled the point as to the lord-lieutenancy; but I know the exact way, and the very time, in which we demanded our peerage. How we threatened to sulk, and did sulk; how we actually sat a whole night on the back benches; and how we made our eldest son dance twice with a daughter of the 'Opposition,'—menaces that no intelligent Cabinet or conscientious 'Whip' could for a moment misunderstand. And oh! my dear Dora, as I write these things, how forcibly I feel the prudence of that step which once we all were so ready to condemn you for having taken. You were indeed right to marry a foreigner. That an English girl should address herself to the married life of England, the first condition is she should never have left England, not even for that holiday-trip to Paris and Switzerland, which people now do, as once

they were wont to 'do Margate.' The whole game of existence is such a scramble with us: we scramble for social rank, for place, for influence, for Court favour, for patronage; and all these call for so much intrigue and plotting, that I vow to you I'd as soon be a Carbonara or a Sanfedista as the wife of an aspiring middle-class Englishman.

"But to return. The county would not have us—we were rich, and we were City folk, and they deemed it an unpardonable pretension in us to come down amongst them. They refused our invitations, and sent us none of their own. We split with them, contested the election against them, and got beaten. We spent unheard-of moneys, and bribed everybody that had not a vote for ten miles round. With universal suffrage, which I believe we promised them, we should have been at the head of the poll; but the freeholders were to a man opposed to us.

"I am told that our opponents behaved ungenerously and unjustly—perhaps they did; at all events, the end of the contest left us without a single acquaintance, and we stood alone in our glory of beaten candidateship, after three months of unheard-of fatigue, and more meanness than I care to mention. The end of all was, to shake the dust off our feet at Herefordshire, and advertise Earlshope for sale. Meanwhile we returned to town; just as shipwrecked men clamber up the first rock in sight, not feeling in their danger what desolation is before them. I take it that the generals of a beaten army talk very little over their late defeat. At all events we observed a most scrupulous reserve, and I don't think that a word was dropped amongst us for a month that could have led a stranger to believe that we had just been beaten in an election, and hunted out of the county.

"I was just beginning to feel that our lesson, a severe one, it is true, might redound to our future benefit, when our eldest-born—I call them all mine, Dora, though not one of them will say mamma to me—discovered that there was an Irish estate to be sold, with a fine house and fine grounds, and that if we couldn't be great folk in the grander kingdom, there was no saying what we might not be in the smaller one. This was too much for me. I accepted the Herefordshire expedition because it smacked of active service. I knew well we should be defeated, and I knew there would be a battle, but I could not consent to banishment. What had I done, I asked myself over and over, that I should be sent to live in Ireland?

"I tried to get up a party against the project, and failed. Augustus Bramleigh—our heir—was in its favour, indeed its chief promoter. Temple, the second son, who is a secretary of embassy, and the most insufferable of puppies, thought it a 'nice place for us,' and certain to save us money; and John—Jack, they call him—who is in the navy, thinks land to be land, besides that, he was once stationed at Cork, and thought it a paradise. If I could do little with the young men, I did less with the girls. Marion, the eldest, who deems her papa a sort of divine-right head of a family, would not discuss the scheme; and Eleanor, who goes in for nature and spontaneous feeling, replied that she was over-joyed at the thought of Ireland, and even half gave me to understand that she was only sorry it was not Africa. I was thus driven to a last resource. I sent for our old friend, Doctor Bartlet, and told him frankly that he must order me abroad to a dry warm climate, where there were few changes of temperature, and nothing depressing in the air. He did the thing to perfection; he called in Forbes to consult with him. The case was very serious, he said. The lung was not yet attacked, but the bronchial tubes were affected. Oh, how grateful I felt to my dear bronchial tubes, for they have sent me to Italy! Yes, Dolly dearest, I am off on Wednesday, and hope within a week after this reaches you to be at your side, pouring out all my sorrows, and asking for that consolation you never yet refused me. And now, to be eminently practical, can you obtain for me that beautiful little villa that overlooked the Borghese Gardens?—it was called the Villino Altieri. The old Prince Giuseppe Altieri, who used to be an adorer of mine, if he be alive may like to resume his ancient passion, and accept me for a tenant; all the more that I can afford to be liberal. Col. B. behaves well always where money enters. I shall want servants, as I only mean to take from this, Rose and my groom. You know the sort of creatures I like; but, for my sake, be particular about the cook—I can't eat 'Romanesque'—and if there be a stray Frenchman wandering about, secure him. Do you remember dear old Paoletti, Dolly, who used to serve up those delicious little maccaroni suppers long ago in our own room?—cheating us into gourmandism by the trick of deceit! Oh, what would I give to be as young again! To be soaring up to heaven, as I listened with closed eyes to the chaunt in the Sistine Chapel, or ascending to another elysium of delight, as I gazed at the 'noble guard' of the

Pope, who, while his black charger was caracolling, and he was holding on by the mane, yet managed to dart towards me such a look of love and devotion! and you remember, Dolly, we lived 'secondo piano,' at the time, and it was plucky of the man, considering how badly he rode. I yearn to go back there. I yearn for those sunsets from the Pincian, and those long rambling rides over the Campagna, leading to nothing but an everlasting dreaminess, and an intense desire that one could go on day after day in the same delicious life of unreality; for it is so, Dolly. Your Roman existence is as much a trance as anything ever was—not a sight nor sound to shock it. The swell of the organ and the odour of the incense follow you even to your pleasures, and, just as the light streams in through the painted windows with its radiance of gold and amber and rose, so does the Church tinge with its mellow lustre all that goes on within its shadow. And how sweet and soothing it all is! I don't know, I cannot know, if it lead to heaven, but it certainly goes in that direction, so far as peace of mind is concerned. What has become of Carlo Lambruschini? is he married? How good-looking he was, and how he sung! I never heard Mario without thinking of him. How is it that our people never have that velvety softness in their tenor voices; there is no richness, no latent depth of tone, and consequently no power of expression? Will his Eminence of the Palazzo Antinori know me again? I was only a child when he saw me last, and used to give me his 'benedizione.' Be sure you bespeak for me the same condescending favour again, heretic though I be. Don't be shocked, dearest Dora, but I mean to be half converted, that is, to have a sort of serious flirtation with the Church; something that is to touch my affections, and yet not wound my principles; something that will surround me with all the fervour of the faith, and yet not ask me to sign the ordinances. I hope I can do this. I eagerly hope it, for it will supply a void in my heart which certainly neither the money article, nor the share list, nor even the details of a county contest, have sufficed to fill. Where is poor little Santa Rosa and his guitar? I want them, Dolly—I want them both. His little tinkling barcaroles were as pleasant as the drip of a fountain on a sultry night; and am I not a highly imaginative creature, who can write of a sultry night in this land of fog, east wind, gust, and gaslight? How my heart bounds to think how soon I shall leave it! How I could travesty the refrain, and cry,

'Rendez moi mon passeport, ou laissez moi mourir.' And now, Dolly darling, I have done. Secure me the villa, engage my people. Tanti saluti to the dear cardinal,—as many loves to all who are kind enough to remember me. Send me a lascia-passare for my luggage—it is voluminous—to the care of the consul at Civita Vecchia, and tell him to look out for me by the arrival of the French boat, somewhere about the 20th or 21st; he can be useful with the custom-house creatures, and obtain me a carriage all to myself in the train.

"It is always more 'carino' to talk of a husband at the last line of a letter, and so I say, give dear Tino all my loves, quite apart and distinct from my other legacies of the like nature. Tell him, I am more tolerant than I used to be—he will know my meaning—that I make paper cigarettes just as well, and occasionally, when in high good-humour, even condescend to smoke one too. Say also, that I have a little chestnut cob, quiet enough for his riding, which shall be always at his orders; that he may dine with me every Sunday, and have one dish—I know well what it will be, I smell the garlic of it even now—of his own dictating; and if these be not enough, add that he may make love to me during the whole of Lent; and with this, believe me

"Your own doating sister,

"AUGUSTA BRAMLEIGH."

"After much thought and many misgivings I deemed it advisable to offer to take one of the girls with me, leaving it open, to mark my indifference, as to which it should be. They both, however, refused, and, to my intense relief, declared that they did not care to come abroad; Augustus also protesting that it was a plan he could not approve of. The diplomatist alone opined that the project had anything to recommend it; but as his authority, like my own, in the family, carries little weight, we were happily outvoted. I have, therefore, the supreme satisfaction—and is it not such?—of knowing that I have done the right thing, and it has cost me nothing; like those excellent people who throw very devout looks towards heaven, without the remotest desire to be there."

CHAPTER III.

"THE EVENING AFTER A HARD RUN."

It was between eight and nine o'clock of a wintry evening near Christmas; a cold drizzle of rain was falling, which on the mountains might have been snow, as Mr. Drayton, the butler at the great house, as Castello was called in the village, stood austerely with his back to the fire in the dining-room, and as he surveyed the table, wondered within himself what could possibly have detained the young gentlemen so late. The hounds had met that day about eight miles off, and Colonel Bramleigh had actually put off dinner half an hour for them, but to no avail; and now Mr. Drayton, whose whole personal arrangements for the evening had been so thoughtlessly interfered with, stood there musing over the wayward nature of youth, and inwardly longing for the time when, retiring from active service, he should enjoy the ease and indulgence his long life of fatigue and hardship had earned.

"They're coming now, Mr. Drayton," said a livery-servant, entering hastily. "George saw the light of their cigars as they came up the avenue."

"Bring in the soup, then, at once, and send George here with another log for the fire. There'll be no dressing for dinner to-day, I'll be bound;" and imparting a sort of sarcastic bitterness to his speech, he filled himself a glass of sherry at the sideboard and tossed it off—only just in time, for the door opened, and a very noisy, merry party of four entered the room, and made for the fire.

"As soon as you like, Drayton," said Augustus, the eldest Bramleigh, a tall, good-looking, but somewhat stern-featured man of about eight-and-twenty. The second, Temple Bramleigh, was middle-sized, with a handsome but somewhat over-delicate-looking face, to which a simpering affectation of imperturbable self-conceit gave a sort of puppyism; while the youngest, Jack, was a bronzed, bright-eyed, fine-looking fellow, manly, energetic, and determined, but with a sweet-

ness when he smiled and showed his good teeth that implied a soft and very impressionable nature. They were all in scarlet coats, and presented a group strikingly good-looking and manly. The fourth of the party was, however, so eminently handsome, and so superior in expression as well as lineament, that the others seemed almost vulgar beside him. He was in black coat and cords, a checked cravat seeming to indicate that he was verging, so far as he might, on the limits of hunting costume; for George L'Estrange was in orders, and the curate of the parish in which Castello stood. It is not necessary to detain the reader by any lengthened narrative of the handsome young parson. Enough to say, that it was not all from choice he had entered the Church,—narrow fortune, and the hope of a small family living, deciding him to adopt a career which, to one who had a passion for field-sports, seemed the very last to gratify his tastes. As a horseman he was confessedly the first in the country round; although his one horse—he was unable to keep a second—condemned him to rare appearance at the meets. The sight of the parson and his black mare, Nora Creina, in the field, were treated with a cheer, for he was a universal favourite, and if a general suffrage could have conferred the episcopate, George would have had his mitre many a day ago.

So sure a seat and so perfect a hand needed never to have wanted a mount. There was not a man with a stable who would not have been well pleased to see his horse ridden by such a rider; but L'Estrange declined all such offers—a sensitive fear of being called a hunting parson deterred him; indeed it was easy to see by the rarity with which he permitted himself the loved indulgence, what a struggle he maintained between will and temptation, and how keenly he felt the sacrifice he imposed upon himself.

Such, in brief, was the party who were now seated at table, well pleased to find themselves in presence of an admirable dinner, in a room replete with every comfort. The day's run, of course, formed the one topic of their talk, and a great deal of merriment went on about the sailor-like performances of Jack, who had been thrown twice, but on the whole acquitted himself creditably, and had taken one high bank so splendidly as to win a cheer from all who saw him.

"I wish you had not asked that poor Frenchman to follow you, Jack," said Augustus; "he was really riding very nicely till he came to that unlucky fence."

"I only cried out, 'Venez donc, monsieur,' and when I

turned my head, after clearing the bank, I saw his horse with his legs in the air and monsieur underneath."

"When I picked him up," broke in L'Estrange, "he said, 'Merci mille fois, monsieur,' and then fainted off, the poor fellow's face actually wearing the smile of courtesy he had got up to thank me."

"Why will Frenchmen try things that are quite out of their beat?" said Jack.

"That's a most absurd prejudice of yours, Master Jack," cried the diplomatist. "Frenchmen ride admirably, now-a-days. I've seen a steeplechase in Normandy, over as stiff a course, and as well ridden, as ever Leicestershire witnessed.

"Yes, yes; I've heard all that," said the sailor, "just as I've heard that their iron fleet is as good, if not better than our own."

"I think our own newspapers rather hint that," said L'Estrange.

"They do more," said Temple; "they prove it. They show a numerical superiority in ships, and they give an account of guns and weight of metal dead against us."

"I'll not say anything of the French; but this much I will say," cried the sailor; "the question will have to be settled one of these days, and I'm right glad to think that it cannot be done by writers in newspapers."

"May I come in?" cried a soft voice; and a very pretty head, with long fair ringlets, appeared at the door.

"Yes. Come by all means," said Jack; "perhaps we shall be able, by your help, to talk of something besides fighting Frenchmen."

While he spoke, L'Estrange had risen, and approached to shake hands with her.

"Sit down with us, Nelly," said Augustus, "or George will get no dinner."

"Give me a chair, Drayton," said she; and, turning to her brother, added, "I only came in to ask some tidings about an unlucky foreigner; the servants have it he was cruelly hurt, some think hopelessly."

"There's the culprit who did the mischief," said Temple, pointing to Jack; "let him recount his feat."

"I'm not to blame in the least, Nelly. I took a smashing high bank, and the little Frenchman tried to follow me and came to grief."

"Ay, but you challenged him to come on," said Temple.

"Now, Master Jack, people don't do that sort of thing in the hunting-field."

"I said, 'Come along, monsieur,' to give him pluck. I never thought for a moment he was to suffer for it."

"But is he seriously hurt?" asked she.

"I think not," said L'Estrange; "he seemed to me more stunned than actually injured. Fortunately for him they had not far to take him, for the disaster occurred quite close to Duckett's Wood, where he is stopping."

"Is he at Longworth's?" asked Augustus.

"Yes. Longworth met him up the Nile, and they travelled together for some months, and, when they parted, it was agreed they were to meet here at Christmas; and though Longworth had written to apprise his people they were coming, he has not appeared himself, and the Frenchman is waiting patiently for his host's arrival."

"And laming his best horse in the meanwhile. That dark bay will never do another day with hounds," said Temple.

"She was shaky before, but she is certainly not the better of this day's work. I'd blister her, and turn her out for a full year," said Augustus.

"I suppose that's another of those things in which the French are our superiors," muttered Jack; "but I suspect I'd think twice about it before I'd install myself in a man's house, and ride his horses in his absence."

"It was the host's duty to be there to receive him," said Temple, who was always on the watch to make the sailor feel how little he knew of society and its ways.

"I hope when you've finished your wine," said Ellen, "you'll not steal off to bed, as you did the other night, without ever appearing in the drawing-room."

"L'Estrange shall go, at all events," cried Augustus. "The Church shall represent the laity."

"I'm not in trim to enter a drawing-room, Miss Bramleigh," said the curate, blushing. "I wouldn't dare to present myself in such a costume."

"I declare," said Jack, "I think it becomes you better than your Sunday rig; don't you, Nelly?"

"Papa will be greatly disappointed, Mr. L'Estrange, if he should not see you," said she, rising to leave the room; "he wants to hear all about your day's sport, and especially about that poor Frenchman. Do you know his name?"

"Yes, here's his card;—Anatole de Pracontal."

"A good name," said Temple, "but the fellow himself looks a snob."

"I call that very hard," said Jack, "to say what any fellow looks like when he is covered with slush and dirt, his hat smashed, and his mouth full of mud."

"Don't forget that we expect to see you," said Ellen, with a nod and a smile to the curate, and left the room.

"And who or what is Mr. Longworth?" said Temple.

"I never met him. All I know is, that he owns that very ugly red-brick house, with the three gables in front, on the hill-side as you go towards Newry," said Augustus.

"I think I can tell you something about him," said the parson; "his father was my grandfather's agent. I believe he began as his steward, when we had property in this county; he must have been a shrewd sort of man, for he raised himself from a very humble origin to become a small estated proprietor and justice of the peace; and when he died, about four years ago, he left Philip Longworth something like a thousand a year in landed property, and some ready money besides."

"And this Longworth, as you call him,—what is he like?"

"A good sort of fellow, who would be better if he was not possessed by a craving ambition to know fine people, and move in their society. Not being able to attain the place he aspires to in his own county, he has gone abroad, and affects to have a horror of English life and ways, the real grievance being his own personal inability to meet acceptance in a certain set. This is what I hear of him; my own knowledge is very slight. I have ever found him well-mannered and polite, and, except a slight sign of condescension, I should say pleasant."

"I take it," said the sailor, "he must be an arrant snob."

"Not necessarily, Jack," said Temple. "There is nothing ignoble in a man's desire to live with the best people, if he do nothing mean to reach that goal."

"Whom do you call the best people, Temple?" asked the other.

"By the best people, I mean the first in rank and station. I am not speaking of their moral excellence, but of their social superiority, and of that pre-eminence which comes of an indisputable position, high name, fortune, and the world's regards. These I call the best people to live with."

"And I do not," said Jack, rising, and throwing his napkin on the table, "not at least for men like myself. I want

to associate with my equals. I want to mix with men who cannot overbear me by any accident of their wealth or title."

"Jack should never have gone into the navy, that's clear," said Augustus, laughing; "but let us draw round the fire and have a cigar."

"You'll have to pay your visit to the drawing-room, L'Estrange," said Jack, "before we begin to smoke, for the governor hates tobacco, and detects it in an instant."

"I declare," said the parson, as he looked at his splashed cords and dirty boots, "I have no courage to present myself in such a trim as this."

"Report yourself and come back at once," cried Jack.

"I'd say, don't go in at all," said Temple.

"That's what I should do, certainly," said Augustus. "Sit down here. What are you drinking? This is Pomare, and better than claret of a cold evening."

And the curate yielded to the soft persuasion, and seated around the fire, the young men talked horses, dogs, and field-sports, till the butler came to say that tea was served in the drawing-room, when, rising, they declared themselves too tired to stay up longer, and wishing each other good night they sauntered up to their rooms to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE CROQUET LAWN.

The day after a hard run, like the day after a battle, is often spent in endeavours to repair the disasters of the struggle. So was it here. The young men passed the morning in the stables, or going back and forward with bandages and liniments. There was a tendon to be cared for, a sore back to be attended to. Benbo, too, wouldn't feed; the groom said he had got a surfeit; which malady, in stable parlance, applies to excess of work, as well as excess of diet.

Augustus Bramleigh was, as becomes an eldest son, grandly imperious and dictatorial, and looked at his poor discomfited beast, as he stood with hanging head and heaving flanks, as though to say it was a disgraceful thing for an animal that had the honour to carry him to look so craven and disheartened. Temple, with the instincts of his craft and calling, cared little for the past, and took but small interest in the horse that was not likely to be soon of use to him; while Jack, with all a sailor's energy, worked away manfully, and assisted the grooms in every way he could. It was at the end of a very active morning, that Jack was returning to the house, when he saw L'Estrange's pony-chaise at the door, with black Nora in the shafts, as fresh and hearty to all seeming as though she had not carried her heavy owner through one of the stiffest runs of the season only the day before.

"Is your master here, Bill?" asked Jack of the small urchin, who barely reached the bar of the bit.

"No, sir; it's Miss Julia has druv over. Master's fishing this morning."

Now Julia L'Estrange was a very pretty girl, and with a captivation of manner which to the young sailor was irresistible. She had been brought up in France, and imbibed that peculiar quiet coquetry which, in its quaint demureness, suggests just enough doubt of its sincerity to be provocative. She was dark enough to be a Spaniard from the south of Spain, and her long back eyelashes were darker even than her eyes. In her walk and her gesture there was that also

which reminded one of Spain: the same blended litheness and dignity; and there was a firmness in her tread which took nothing from its elasticity.

When Jack heard that she was in the house, instead of hurrying in to meet her he sat moodily down on the steps of the door and lighted his cigar. "What's the use?" muttered he, and the same depressing sentence recurred to him again and again. They are very dark moments in life in which we have to confess to ourselves that, fight how we may, fate must beat us; that the very utmost we can do is to maintain a fierce struggle with destiny, but that in the end we must succumb. The more frequently poor Jack saw her, the more hopelessly he felt his lot. What was he—what could he ever be—to aspire to such a girl as Julia? Was not the very presumption a thing to laugh at? He thought of how his elder brother would entertain such a notion; the cold solemnity with which he would ridicule his pretensions; and then Temple would treat him to some profound reflections on the misery of poor marriages; while Marion would chime in with some cutting reproaches on the selfishness with which, to gratify a caprice—she would call it a caprice—he ignored the just pretensions of his family, and the imperative necessity that pressed them to secure their position in the world by great alliances. This was Marion's code: it took three generations to make a family; the first must be wealthy; the second, by the united force of money and ability, secure a certain station of power and social influence; the third must fortify these by marriages—marriages of distinction; after which mere time would do the rest.

She had hoped much from her father's second marriage, and was grievously disappointed on finding how her stepmother's family affected displeasure at the match as a reason for a coldness towards them; while Lady Augusta herself as openly showed that she had stooped to the union merely to secure herself against the accidents of life, and raise her above the misery of living on a very small income.

Jack was thinking moodily over all these things as he sat there, and with such depression of spirit that he half resolved, instead of staying out his full leave, to return to his ship at Portsmouth, and so forget shore life and all its fascinations. He heard the sound of a piano, and shortly after the rich delicious tones of Julia's voice. It was that mellow quality of sound that musicians call mezzo soprano, whose gift it is to steal softly over the senses and steep them in a sweet

rapture of peaceful delight. As the strains floated out, he felt as though the measure of incantation was running over for him, and he arose with a bound and hurried off into the wood. "I'll start to-morrow. I'll not let this folly master me," muttered he. "A fellow who can't stand up against his own fancies is not worth his salt. I'll go on board again and think of my duty," and he tried to assure himself that of all living men a sailor had least excuse for such weaknesses as these.

He had not much sympathy with the family ambitions. He thought that as they had wealth enough to live well and handsomely, a good station in the world, and not any one detracting element from their good luck, either as regarded character or health, it was downright ingratitude to go in search of disappointments and defeats. It was, to his thinking, like a ship with plenty of sea-room rushing madly on to her ruin amongst the breakers. "I think Nelly is of my own mind," said he, "but who can say how long she will continue to be so? these stupid notions of being great folk will get hold of her at last. The high-minded Marion and that great genius Temple are certain to prevail in the end, and I shall always be a splendid example to point at and show the melancholy consequences of degenerate tastes and ignoble ambitions."

The sharp trot of a horse on the gravel road beside him startled him in his musings, and the pony-carriage whisked rapidly by; Augustus driving and Julia at his side. She was laughing. Her merry laugh rang out above the brisk jingle of horse and harness, and to the poor sailor it sounded like the knell of all his hopes. "What a confounded fool I was not to remember I had an elder brother," said he, bitterly. That he added something inaudible about the perfidious nature of girls is possibly true, but not being in evidence it is not necessary to record it.

Let us turn from the disconsolate youth to what is certes a prettier picture—the croquêt lawn behind the house, where the two sisters, with the accomplished Temple, were engaged at a game.

"I hope, girls," said he, in one of his very finest drawls, "the future head of house and hopes is not going to make a precious fool of himself."

"You mean with the curate's sister," said Marion, with a saucy toss of her head. "I scarcely think he could be so absurd."

"I can't see the absurdity," broke in Ellen. "I think a duke might make her a duchess, and no great condescension in the act."

"Quite true, Nelly," said Temple; "that's exactly what a duke might do; but Mr. Bramleigh cannot. When you are at the top of the ladder, there's nothing left for you but to come down again; but the man at the bottom has to try to go up."

"But why must there be a ladder at all, Temple?" asked she, eagerly.

"Isn't that speech Nelly all over?" cried Marion, haughtily.

"I hope it is," said Ellen, "if it serves to convey what I faithfully believe,—that we are great fools in not enjoying a very pleasant lot in life instead of addressing ourselves to ambitions far and away beyond us."

"And which be they?" asked Temple, crossing his arms over his mallet, and standing like a soldier on guard.

"To be high and titled, or if not titled, to be accepted among that class, and treated as their equals in rank and condition."

"And why not, Nelly? What is this wonderful ten thousand that we all worship? Whence is it recruited, and how? These double wallflowers are not of Nature's making; they all come of culture, of fine mould, careful watering, and good gardening. They were single-petalled once on a time, like ourselves. Mind, it is no radical says this, girls—*moi qui vous parle* am no revolutionist, no leveller! I like these grand conditions, because they give existence its best stimulus, its noblest aspirations. The higher one goes in life—as on a mountain—the more pure the air and the wider the view."

"And do you mean to tell me that Augustus would consult his happiness better in marrying some fine lady, like our grand step-mamma for instance, than a charming girl like Julia?" said Ellen.

"If Augustus' notions of happiness were to be measured by mine, I should say yes, unquestionably yes. Love is a very fleeting sentiment. The cost of the article, too, suggests most uncomfortable reflections. All the more as the memory comes when the acquisition itself is beginning to lose value. My former chief at Munich—the cleverest man of the world I ever met—used to say, as an investment, a pretty wife was a mistake. 'If,' said he, 'you laid out your money on a

picture, your venture might turn out a bargain; if you bought a colt, your two-year-old might win a Derby; but your beauty of to-day will be barely good-looking in five years, and will be a positive fright in fifteen.'"

"Your accomplished friend was an odious beast!" said Nelly. "What was his name, Temple?"

"Lord Culduff, one of the first diplomatists in Europe."

"Culduff? How strange! Papa's agent, Mr. Harding, mentioned the name at breakfast. He said there was a nobleman come over from Germany to see his estates in the north of Down, where they had some hopes of having discovered coal."

"Is it possible Lord Culduff could be in our neighbourhood? The governor must ask him here at once," said Temple, with an animation of manner most unusual with him. "There must be no time lost about this. Finish your game without me, girls, for this matter is imminent;" and so saying, he resigned his mallet and hastened away to the house.

"I never saw Temple so eager about anything before," said Nelly. "It's quite charming to see how the mere mention of a grand name can call forth all his energy."

"Temple knows the world very well; and he knows how the whole game of life is conducted by a very few players, and that every one who desires to push his way must secure the intimacy, if he can, or at least the acquaintance, of these." And Marion delivered this speech with a most oracular and pretentious tone.

"Yes," said Nelly, with a droll sparkle in her eye; "he declared that profound statement last evening in the very same words. Who shall say it is not an immense advantage to have a brother so full of sage maxims, while his sisters are seen to catch up his words of wisdom, and actually believe them to be their own?"

"Temple may not be a Talleyrand; but he is certainly as brilliant as the charming curate," said Marion, tartly.

"Oh, poor George!" cried Nelly; and her cheek flushed while she tried to seem indifferent. "Nobody ever called him a genius. When one says he is very good-looking and very good-humoured, *tout est dit!*"

"He is very much out of place as a parson."

"Granted. I suspect he thinks so himself."

"Men usually feel that they cannot take orders without some stronger impulse than a mere desire to gain a livelihood."

"I have never talked to him on the matter; but perhaps he had no great choice of a career."

"He might have gone into the army, I suppose? He'd have found scores of creatures there with about his own measure of intelligence."

"I fancied you liked George, Marion," said the other. And there was something half tender, half reproachful, in her tone.

"I liked him so far, that it was a boon to find anything so like a gentleman in this wild savagery; but if you mean that I would have endured him in town, or would have noticed him in society, you are strangely mistaken."

"Poor George!" and there was something comic in her glance as she sighed these words out.

"There; you have won," said Marion, throwing down her mallet. "I must go and hear what Temple is going to do. It would be a great blessing to see a man of the world and a man of mark in this dreary spot, and I hope papa will not lose the present opportunity to secure him."

"Are you alone, Nelly?" said her eldest brother, some time after, as he came up, and found her sitting, lost in thought, under a tree.

"Yes. Marion got tired and went in, and Temple went to ask papa about inviting some high and mighty personage who chances to be in our neighbourhood."

"Who is he?"

"Lord Culduff, he called him."

"Oh! a tremendous swell; an ambassador somewhere. What brings him down here?"

"I forget. Yes! it was something about a mine; he has found tin, or copper, or coal, I don't remember which, on some property of his here. By the way, Augustus, do you really think George L'Estrange a fool?"

"Think him a fool?"

"I mean," said she, blushing deeply, "Marion holds his intelligence so cheaply that she is quite shocked at his presuming to be in orders."

"Well, I don't think him exactly what Temple calls an *esprit fort*, but he is a very nice fellow, very companionable, and a thorough gentleman in all respects."

"How well you have said it, dear Augustus," said she, with a face beaming with delight. "Where are you off to? Where are you going?"

"I am going to see the yearlings, in the paddock below the river."

"May I go with you, Gussy?" said she, drawing her arm within his. "I do like a brisk walk with you; and you always go like one with a purpose."

CHAPTER V.

CONFIDENTIAL TALK.

TEMPLE found his father in his study, deeply engaged with a mass of papers and letters, and by the worn and fatigued expression of his face showing that he had passed a day of hard work.

"I hope I do not disturb you," said Temple, as he leaned on the table at which the other was seated.

"Throw that cigar away, and I'll tell you," said the old man, with a faint smile. "I never can conquer my aversion to tobacco. What do you want to say? Is it anything we cannot talk over at dinner, or after dinner?—for this post leaves at such an inconvenient hour, it gives me scant time to write."

"I beg a thousand pardons, sir; but I have just heard that a very distinguished member of our corps—I mean the diplomatic corps—is down in this neighbourhood, and I want your permission to ask him over here."

"Who is he?"

"Lord Culduff."

"What! that old scamp who ran away with Lady Clifford? I thought he couldn't come to England?"

"Why, sir, he is one of the first men we have. It was he that negotiated the Erzeroum treaty, and I heard Sir Stamford Bolter say he was the only man in England who understood the Sound dues."

"He ran off with another man's wife, and I don't like that."

"Well, sir, as he didn't marry her afterwards, it was clear it was only a passing indiscretion."

"Oh, indeed! that view of it never occurred to me. I suppose, then, it is in this light the corps regards it?"

"I trust so, sir. Where there is no complication there is no loss of character; and as Lord Culduff is received everywhere, and courted in the very best circles, I think it would be somewhat strange if we were to set up to teach the world how it ought to treat him."

"I have no such pretension. I simply claim the right to choose the people I invite to my house."

"He may be my chief to-morrow or next day," said Temple.

"So much the worse for you."

"Certainly not, sir, if we seize the opportunity to show him some attentions. He is a most high-bred gentleman, and from his abilities, his rank, and his connections, sure to be at the head of the line; and I confess I'd be very much ashamed if he were to hear, as he is sure to hear, that I was in his vicinity without my ever having gone to wait on him."

"Go by all means, then. Wait upon him at once, Temple; but I tell you frankly, I don't fancy presenting such a man to your sisters."

"Why, sir, there is not a more unobjectionable man in all England; his manners are the very type of respectful deference towards ladies. He belongs to that old school which professes to be shocked with modern levity, while his whole conversation is a sort of quiet homage."

"Well, well; how long would he stay—a week?"

"A couple of days, perhaps, if he came at all. Indeed, I greatly doubt that he would come. They say he is here about some coal-mine they have discovered on his property."

"What! has he found coal?" cried the old man, eagerly.

"So it is said, sir; or, at least, he hopes so."

"It's only lignite. I'm certain it's only lignite. I have been deceived myself twice or thrice, and I don't believe coal—real coal—exists in this part of Ireland."

"Of that I can tell you nothing; he, however, will only be too glad to talk the matter over with you."

"Yes; it is an interesting topic,—very interesting. Snell says that the great carboniferous strata are all in Ireland, but that they lie deep and demand vast capital to work them. He predicts a great manufacturing prosperity to the country when Manchester and Birmingham will have sunk into ruins. He opines that this lignite is a mere indication of the immense vein of true carbon beneath. But what should this old debauchee know of a great industrial theme! His whole anxiety will be to turn it to some immediate profit. He'll

be looking for a loan, you'll see. Mark my words, Temple, he'll want an advance on his colliery." And he gave one of those rich chuckling laughs which are as peculiar to the moneyed classes as ever a simpering smile was to enamelled beauty.

"I don't say," added he, after a moment, "that the scheme may not be a good one—an excellent one. Sampson says that all manufactures will be transferred to Ireland yet,—that this will be in some future time the great seat of national industry and national wealth. Let your grand friend come then by all means; there is at least one topic we can talk over together."

Too happy to risk the success he had obtained by any further discussion, Temple hurried away to give orders for the great man's reception. There was a small suite of rooms, which had been furnished with unusual care and elegance when it was believed that Lady Augusta would have honoured Castello with her presence. Indeed, she had so far favoured the belief as to design some of the decorations herself, and had photographs taken of the rooms and the furniture, as well as of the views which presented themselves from the windows.

Though these rooms were on the second floor, they were accessible from without by a carriage-drive, which wound gradually up among the terraced gardens to a sort of plateau, where a marble fountain stood, with a group of Naiads in the midst, over whom a perpetual spray fell like a veil; the whole surrounded with flowery shrubs and rare plants, sheltered from east and north by a strong belt of trees, and actually imparting to the favoured spot the character of a southern climate and country.

As the gardener was careful to replace the exhausted or faded flowers by others in full bloom, and as on every available day he displayed here the richest treasures of his conservatory, there was something singularly beautiful in the contrast of this foreground, glowing in tropical luxuriance, with the massive forest-trees down below, and farther in the distance the stern and rugged lines of the Mourne Mountains, as they frowned on the sea.

Within doors, everything that wealth could contribute to comfort was present, and though there was magnificence in the costly silk of the hangings and the velvety richness of the carpets, the prevailing impression was that it was enjoyment, not splendour, was sought for. There were few

pictures—a Ruysdael over the fireplace in the drawing-room, and two or three Cuyps—placid scenes of low-lying landscapes, bathed in soft sunsets. The doors were all hidden by heavy curtains, and a sense of voluptuous snugness seemed the spirit of the place.

The keys of this precious suite were in Marion's keeping, and as she walked through the rooms with Temple, and expatiated on the reckless expenditure bestowed on them, she owned that for any less distinguished guest than the great diplomatist she would never have consented to their being opened. Temple, however, was loud in his praises, went over his high connections and titled relatives, his great services, and the immense reputation they had given him, and, last of all, he spoke of his personal qualities, the charm of his manner, and the captivation of his address, so that finally she became as eager as himself to see this great and gifted man beneath their roof.

During the evening they talked much together of what they should do to entertain their illustrious guest. There was, so to say, no neighbourhood, nor any possibility of having people to meet him, and they must, consequently, look to their home resources to amuse him.

"I hope Augustus will be properly attentive," said Temple.

"I'm certain he will. I'm more afraid of Nelly, if there be anything strange or peculiar in Lord Culduff's manner. She never puts any curb on her enjoyment of an oddity, and you'll certainly have to caution her that her humouristic talents must be kept in abeyance just now."

"I can trust Lord Culduff's manner to repress any tendency of this kind. Rely upon it, his courtly urbanity and high tone will protect him from all indiscretions; and Nelly —I'm sorry to say it, Marion—but Nelly is vulgar."

"She is certainly too familiar on fresh acquaintance. I have told her more than once that you do not always please people by showing you are on good terms with yourself. It is a great misfortune to her that she never was "out" before she came here. One season in town would have done more for her than all our precepts."

"Particularly as she heeds them so little," said Temple, snappishly.

"Cannot we manage to have some people to meet Lord Culduff at dinner? Who are the Gages who left their cards?"

"They sent them—not left them. Montifort Gage is the master of the hounds, and, I believe, a person of some consideration here. He does not, however, appear to invite much intimacy. His note acknowledging our subscription—it was a hundred pounds too—was of the coldest, and we exchanged a very few formal words at the meet yesterday."

"Are we going to repeat the Herefordshire experiment here, then?" And she asked the question with a sparkling eye and a flushed cheek, as though the feeling it excited was not easily to be repressed.

"There's a Sir Roger Kennedy, too, has called."

"Yes, and Harding says he is married; but his wife's name is not on the card."

"I take it they know very little of the habits of the world. Let us remember, Marion, where we are. Iceland is next door but one. I thought Harding would have looked to all this; he ought to have taken care that the county was properly attentive. An agent never wishes to see his chief reside on the property. It is like in my own career,—one is only chargé-d' affaires when the head of the legation is on leave."

"And this was the county we were told was ready to receive us with a sort of frantic enthusiasm. I wonder, Temple, do people ever tell the truth!"

"Yes, when they want you not to believe them. You see, Marion, we blundered here pretty much as we blundered in England. You'll not get the governor to believe it, nor perhaps even Augustus, but there is a diplomacy of every-day life, and people who fancy they can dispense with it invariably come to grief. Now I always told them—indeed I grew tired telling them—every mile that separates you from a capital diminishes the power of your money. In the city you reign supreme, but to be a county magnate you need scores of things beside a long credit at your banker's."

A very impatient toss of the head showed that Marion herself was not fully a convert to these sage opinions, and it was with a half-rude abruptness that she broke in by asking how he intended to convey his invitation to Lord Culduff.

"There's the difficulty," said he, gravely. "He is going about from one place to another. Harding says he was at Rathbeggan on Sunday last, and was going on to Dinasker next day. I have been looking over the map, but I see no roads to these places. I think our best plan is to dispatch Lacy with a letter. Lacy is the smartest fellow we have, and

I think will be sure to find him. But the letter, too, is a puzzle."

"Why should it be? It will be, I suppose, a mere formal invitation?"

"No, no. It would never do to say, Colonel Bramleigh presents his compliments, and requests—and so on. The thing must have another tone. It ought to have a certain turn of expression."

"I am not aware of what amount of acquaintanceship exists between you and Lord Culduff," said she, stiffly.

"The very least in life. I suspect if we met in a club we should pass without speaking. I arrived at his Legation on the morning he was starting on leave. I remember he asked me to breakfast, but I declined, as I had been three days and nights on the road, and wanted to get to bed. I never met him since. What makes you look so serious, Marion?"

"I'm thinking what we shall do with him if he comes. Does he shoot, or hunt, or fish?—can you give him any out-o'-door occupation?"

"I'm quite abroad as to all his tastes and habits. I only know so much of him as pertains to his character in the 'line' but I'll go and write my note. I'll come back and show you what I have said," added he, as he gained the door.

When Marion was left alone to reflect over her brother's words, she was not altogether pleased. She was no convert to his opinions as to the necessity of any peculiar stratagem in the campaign of life. She had seen the house in town crowded with very great and distinguished company; she had observed how wealth asserted itself in society, and she could not perceive that in their acceptance by the world there was any the slightest deficiency of deference and respect. If they had failed in their county experiment in England, it was, she thought, because her father rashly took up an extreme position in politics, a mistake which Augustus indeed saw and protested against, but which some rash advisers were able to over-persuade the Colonel into adopting.

Lady Augusta, too, was an evidence that the better classes did not decline this alliance, and on the whole she felt that Temple's reasonings were the offshoots of his peculiar set; that small priesthood of society who hold themselves so essentially above the great body of mankind.

"Not that we must make any more mistakes, however,"

thought she. "Not that we can afford another defeat;" and as she arrived at this sage judgment, Temple entered, with some sheets of notepaper in his hand.

"I'm not quite satisfied with any of these, Marion; I suspect I must just content myself with a mere formal 'requests the company.'"

"Let me hear what you have said."

"Here's the first," said he, reading. "'My dear lord,—The lucky accident of your lordship's presence in this neighbourhood—which I have only accidentally learned.'"

"O dear, no! that's a chapter of 'accidents.'"

"Well; listen to this one: 'If I can trust to a rumour that has just reached us here, but which, it is possible our hopes may have given a credence to, that stern fact will subsequently deny, or reject, or contradict.' I'm not fully sure which verb to take."

"Much worse than the other," said Marion.

"It's all the confounded language; I could turn it in French to perfection."

"But I fancied your whole life was passed in this sort of phrase-fashioning, Temple?" said she, half smiling.

"Nothing of the kind. We keep the vernacular only for post-paper, and it always begins: 'My lord,—Since by my despatch No. 7,028, in which I reported to your lordship the details of an interview accorded me by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of this Government;' and so on. Now all this, to the polite intercourse of society, is pretty much what singlestick is to the rapier. I wish you'd do this for me, Marion. After so many baulks, one always ends by a tumble."

"I declare I see no occasion for smartness or epigram. I'd simply say, 'I have only just heard that you are in our neighbourhood, and I beg to convey my father's hope and request that you will not leave it without giving us the honour of your company here.' You can throw in as many of your personal sentiments as may serve, like wool in a packing-case, to keep the whole tight and compact; but I think something like that would suffice."

"Perhaps so," said he, musingly, as he once more returned to his room. When he reappeared, after some minutes, it was with the air and look of a man who had just thrown off some weighty burden. "Thank Heaven, it's done and despatched," said he. "I have been looking over the F. O. Guide, to see whether I addressed him aright. I fancied he

was a Privy Councillor, and I find he is not; he is a K.C.B., however, and a Guelph, with leave to wear the star."

"Very gratifying to us—I mean if he should come here," said she, with a mocking smile.

"Don't pretend you do not value all these things fully as much as myself, Marion. You know well what the world thinks of them. These distinctions were no more made by us than the money of the realm; but we use one of them like the other, well aware that it represents a certain value, and is never disputed."

"How old is your friend?"

"Well, he is certainly not young. "Here's what F. O. contributes to his biography. 'Entered the army as cornet in the 2nd Life Guards, 1816.' A precious long time ago that. 'First groom of the bedchamber—promoted—placed on half-pay—entered diplomatic service—in—19; special mission to Hanover—made K.C.B.—contested Essex, and returned on a petition—went back to diplomacy, and named special envoy to Teheran.' Ah! now we are coming to his real career."

"Oh, dear. I'd rather hear about him somewhat earlier," said she, taking the book out of his hand, and throwing it on the table. "It is a great penalty to pay for greatness to be gibbeted in this fashion. Don't you think so, Temple?"

"I wish I could see myself gibbeted, as you call it."

"If the will makes the way, we ought to be very great people," said she, with a smile, half derisive, half real. "Jack, perhaps not; nor Ellen. They have booked themselves in second-class carriages."

"I'll go and look up Harding; he is a secret sort of a fellow. I believe all agents assume that manner to every one but the head of the house and the heir. But perhaps I could manage to find out why these people have not called upon us; there must be something in it."

"I protest I think we ought to feel grateful to them; an exchange of hospitalities with them would be awful."

"Very likely; but I think we ought to have had the choice, and this they have not given us."

"And even for that I am grateful," said she, as with a haughty look she rose and left the room.

CHAPTER VI.

UP IN THE MOUNTAINS.

About eighteen miles from Bishop's Folly, and in the very midst of the Mourne Mountains, a low spur of land projects into the sea by a thin narrow promontory, so narrow, indeed, that in days of heavy sea and strong wind, the waves have been seen to meet across it. Some benevolent individual had once conceived the idea of planting a small lighthouse here, as a boon to the fishermen who frequent the coast. The lighthouse was built, but never occupied, and after standing some years in a state of half ruin, was turned into a sort of humble inn or shebeen, most probably a mere pretext to cover its real employment as a depôt for smuggled goods; for in the days of high duties French silks and brandies found many channels into Ireland beside the road that lay through her Majesty's customs. Mr., or, as he was more generally called, Tim Mackessy, the proprietor, was a well-known man in those parts. He followed what in Ireland for some years back has been as much a profession as law or physic, and occasionally a more lucrative line than either—Patriotism. He was one of those ready, voluble, self-asserting fellows, who abound in Ireland, but whose favour is not the less with their countrymen from the fact of their frequency. He had, he said, a father, who suffered for his country in ninety-eight; and he had himself maintained the family traditions by being twice imprisoned in Carrickfergus Gaol, and narrowly escaping transportation for life. On the credit of this martyrdom, and the fact that Mr. O'Connell once called him "honest Tim Mackessy," he had lived in honour and repute amongst such of his countrymen as "feel the yoke and abhor the rule of the Saxon."

For the present, we are, however, less occupied by Tim and his political opinions than by two guests, who had arrived a couple of days before, and were now seated at breakfast in that modest apartment called the best parlour. Two men less like in appearance might not readily be found. One, thin, fresh-looking, with handsome but haughty features,

slightly stooped, but to all seeming as much from habit as from any debility, was Lord Culduff; his age might be computed by some reference to the list of his services, but would have been a puzzling calculation from a mere inspection of himself. In figure and build, he might be anything from five-and-thirty to two or three-and-forty; in face, at a close inspection, he might have been high up in the sixties.

His companion was a middle-sized middle-aged man, with a mass of bushy curly black hair, a round bullet head, wide-set eyes, and a short nose, of the leonine pattern; his mouth, large and thick-lipped, had all that mobility that denotes talker and eater: for Mr. Cutbill, civil engineer and architect, was both garrulous and gourmand, and lived in the happy enjoyment of being thought excellent company, and a first-rate judge of a dinner. He was musical too; he played the violoncello with some skill, and was an associate of various philharmonics, who performed fantasias and fugues to dreary old ladies and snuffy old bachelors, who found the amusement an economy that exacted nothing more costly than a little patience. Among these Tom Cutbill was a man of wit and man of the world. His career brought him from time to time into contact with persons of high station and rank, and these he ventilated amongst his set in the most easy manner, familiarly talking of Beaufort, and Argyle, and Cleveland, as though they were household words.

It was reported that he had some cleverness as an actor: and he might have had, for the man treated life as a drama, and was eternally representing something—some imaginary character—till any little fragment of reality in him had been entirely rubbed out by the process, and he remained the mere personation of whatever the society he chanced to be in wanted or demanded of him.

He had been recommended to Lord Culduff's notice by his lordship's London agent, who had said, "He knows the scientific part of his business as well as the great swells of his profession, and he knows the world a precious sight better than they do. *They* could tell you if you have coal, but he will do that and more; *he* will tell you what to do with it." It was on the advice thus given Lord Culduff had secured his services, and taken him over to Ireland. It was a bitter pill to swallow, for this old broken-down man of fashion, self-indulgent, fastidious, and refined, to travel in such company; but his affairs were in a sad state, from years of extravagance and high living, and it was only by the sup-

posed discovery of these mines on this unprofitable part of his estate that his creditors consented to defer that settlement which might sweep away almost all that remained to him. Cutbill was told, too,—"His lordship is rather hard up just now, and cannot be liberal as he could wish; but he is a charming person to know, and will treat you like a brother." The one chink in this shrewd fellow's armour was his snobbery. It was told of him once, in a very dangerous illness, when all means of inducing perspiration had failed, that some one said,—"Try him with a lord, it never failed with Tom yet." If an untitled squire had proposed to take Mr. Cutbill over special to Ireland for a hundred-pound note and his expenses, he would have indignantly refused the offer, and assisted the proposer besides to some unpalatable reflections on his knowledge of life; the thought, however, of journeying as Lord Culduff's intimate friend, being treated as his brother, thrown, from the very nature of the country they travelled in, into close relations, and left free to improve the acquaintance by all those social wiles and accomplishments on which he felt he could pride himself, was a bribe not to be resisted. And thus was it that these two men, so unlike in every respect, found themselves fellow-travellers and companions.

A number of papers, plans, and drawings littered the breakfast-table at which they were seated, and one of these, representing the little promontory of arid rock, tastefully coloured and converted into a handsome pier, with flights of steps descending to the water, and massive cranes swinging bulky masses of merchandise into tall-masted ships, was just then beneath his lordship's double eyeglass.

"Where may all this be, Cutbill? is it Irish?" asked he.

"It is to be out yonder, my lord," said he, pointing through the little window to the rugged line of rocks, over which the sea was breaking in measured rhythm.

"You don't mean there?" said Lord Culduff, half horrified.

"Yes, my lord, there! Your lordship is doubtless not aware that of all her Majesty's faithful lieges the speculative are the least gifted with the imaginative faculty, and to supply this unhappy want in their natures, we, whose function it is to suggest great industrial schemes or large undertakings—we 'promoters,' as we are called, are obliged to supply, not merely by description, but actually pictorially, the results which success will in due time arrive at. We

have, as the poet says, to annihilate 'both time and space,' and arrive at a goal which no effort of these worthy people's minds could possibly attain to. What your lordship is now looking at is a case in point, and however little promising the present aspect of that coast-line may seem, time and money—yes, my lord, time and money—the two springs of all success—will make even greater change than you see depicted here."

Mr. Cutbill delivered these words with a somewhat pompous tone, and in a voice such as he might have used in addressing an acting committee or a special board of works; for one of his fancies was to believe himself an orator of no mean power.

"I trust—I fervently trust, Mr. Cutbill," said his lordship, nervously, "that the coal-fields are somewhat nigher the stage of being remunerative than that broken line of rock is to this fanciful picture before me."

"Wealth, my lord, like heat, has its latent conditions."

"Condescend to a more commonplace tone, sir, in consideration of my ignorance, and tell me frankly, is the mine as far from reality as that reef there?"

Fortunately for Mr. Cutbill perhaps, the door was opened at this critical juncture, and the landlord presented himself with a note, stating that the groom who brought it would wait for the answer.

Somewhat agitated by the turn of his conversation with the engineer, Lord Culduff tore open the letter, and ran his eyes towards the end to see the signature.

"Who is Bramleigh—Temple Bramleigh? Oh, I remember, an attaché. What's all this about Castello? Where's Castello?"

"That's the name they give the Bishop's Folly, my lord," said the landlord, with a half grin.

"What business have these people to know I am here at all? Why must they persecute me? You told me, Cutbill, that I was not to be discovered."

"So I did my lord, and I made the *Down Express* call you Mr. Morris, of Charing Cross."

His lordship winced a little at the thought of such a liberty, even for a disguise, but he was now engaged with the note, and read on without speaking.

"Nothing could be more courteous, certainly," said he, folding it up, and laying it beside him on the table. "They invite me over to—what's the name?—Castello, and promise me perfect liberty as regards my time. 'To make the

place my head-quarters,' as he says. Who are these Bramlieghs? You know every one Cutbill; who are they?"

"Bramleigh and Underwood are bankers, very old established firm. Old Bramleigh was a brewer, at Slough; George the Third never would drink any other stout than Bramleigh's. There was a large silver flagon, called the 'King's Quaigh,' always brought out when his Majesty rode by, and very vain old Bramleigh used to be of it, though I don't think it figures now on the son's sideboard—they have leased the brewery."

"Oh, they have leased the brewery, have they?"

"That they have; the present man got himself made Colonel of militia, and meant to be a county member, and he might too, if he hadn't been in too great a hurry about it; but county people won't stand being carried by assault. Then they made other mistakes; tried it on with the Liberals, in a shire where everythiug that called itself gentleman was Tory; in fact, they plunged from one hole into another, till they regularly swamped themselves; and as their house held a large mortgage on these estates in Ireland, they paid off the other incumbrances and have come to live here. I know the whole story, for it was an old friend of mine who made the plans for restoring the mansion."

"I suspect that the men in your profession, Cutbill, know as much of the private history of English familes as any in the land?"

"More, my lord; far more even than the solicitors, for people suspect the solicitors, and they never suspect us. We are detectives in plain clothes."

The pleasant chuckle with which Mr. Cutbill finished his speech was not responded to by his lordship, who felt that the other should have accepted his compliment, without any attempt on his own part to "cap" it.

"How long do you imagine I may be detained here, Cutbill?" asked he, after a pause.

"Let us say a week, my lord, or ten days at furthest. We ought certainly to see that new pit opened, before you leave."

"In that case I may as well accept this invitation. I can bear a little boredom if they have only a good cook. Do you suppose they have a good cook?"

"The agent, Jos Harding, told me they had a Frenchman, and that the house is splendidly got up."

"What's to be done with *you*, Cutbill, eh?"

"I am at your lordship's orders," said he, with a very quiet composure.

"You have nothing to do over at that place just now?—I mean at the mine."

"No, my lord. Till Pollard makes his report, I have nothing to call me over there."

"And here, I take it, we have seen everything," and he gave a very hopeless look through the little window as he spoke.

"There it is, my lord," said Cutbill, taking up the coloured picture of the pier, with its busy crowds, and its bustling porters. "There it is!"

"I should say, Cutbill, there it is not!" observed the other bitterly. "Anything more unlike the reality is hard to conceive."

"Few things are as like a cornet in the Life Guards, as a child in a perambulator——"

"Very well, all that," interrupted Lord Culduff, impatiently. "I know that sort of argument perfectly. I have been pestered with the acorn, or rather, with the unborn forests in the heart of the acorn for many a day. Let us get a stride in advance of these platitudes. Is the whole thing like this?" and he threw the drawing across the table contemptuously as he spoke. "Is it all of this pattern, eh?"

"In one sense it is very like," said the other, with a greater amount of decision in his tone than usual.

"In which case, then, the sooner we abandon it the better," said Lord Culduff, rising, and standing with his back to the fire, his head high, and his look intensely haughty.

"It is not for me to dictate to your lordship—I could never presume to do so—but certainly it is not every one in Great Britain who could reconcile himself to relinquish one of the largest sources of wealth in the kingdom. Taking the lowest estimate of Carrick Nuish mine alone,—and when I say the lowest, I mean throwing the whole thing into a company of shareholders and neither working nor risking a shilling yourself,—you may put from twenty to five-and-twenty thousand pounds into your pocket within a twelvemonth."

"Who will guarantee that, Cutbill?" said Lord Culduff, with a faint smile.

"I am ready myself to do so, provided my counsels be strictly followed. I will do so, with my whole professional reputation,"

"I am charmed to hear you say so. It is a very gratifying piece of news for me. You feel, therefore, certain that we have struck coal?"

"My, lord, when a young man enters life from one of the universities, with a high reputation for ability, he can go a long way—if he only be prudent—living on his capital. It is the same thing in a great industrial enterprise; you must start at speed, and with a high pressure—get way on you, as the sailors say—and you will skim along for half a mile after the steam is off."

"I come back to my former question. Have we found coal?"

"I hope so. I trust we have. Indeed there is every reason to say we have found coal. What we need most at this moment is a man like that gentleman whose note is on the table—a large capitalist, a great City name. Let him associate himself in the project, and success is as certain as that we stand here."

"But you have just told me he has given up his business life—retired from affairs altogether."

"My lord, these men never give up. They buy estates, they can live at Rome or Paris, and take a château at Cannes, and try to forget Mincing Lane and the rest of it; but if you watch them, you'll see it's the money article in the *Times* they read before the leader. They have but one barometer for everything that happens in Europe—how are the exchanges? and they are just as greedy of a good thing as on any morning they hurried down to the City in a hansom to buy in or sell out. See if I'm not right. Just throw out a hint, no more, that you'd like a word of advice from Colonel Bramleigh about your project; say it's a large thing—too large for an individual to cope with—that you are yourself the least possible of a business man, being always engaged in very different occupations,—and ask what course he would counsel you to take."

"I might show him these drawings—these coloured plans."

"Well, indeed, my lord," said Cutbill, brushing his mouth with his hand, to hide a smile of malicious drollery, "I'd say I'd not show him the plans. The pictorial rarely appeals to men of his stamp. It's the multiplication-table they like, and if all the world were like them one would never throw poetry into a project."

"You'll have to come with me, Cutbill; I see that," said his lordship, reflectingly.

"My lord, I am completely at your orders."

"Yes; this is a sort of negotiation you will conduct better than myself. I am not conversant with this sort of thing, nor the men who deal in them. A great treaty, a question of boundary, a royal marriage,—any of these would find me ready and prepared, but with the diplomacy of dividends, I own myself little acquainted. You must come with me."

Cutbill bowed in acquiescence, and was silent.

CHAPTER VII.

AT LUNCHEON.

As the family at the great house were gathered together at luncheon on the day after the events we have just recorded, Lord Culduff's answer to Temple Bramleigh's note was fully and freely discussed.

"Of course," said Jack, "I speak under correction; but how comes it that your high and mighty friend brings another man with him? Is Cutbill an attaché? Is he one of what you call 'the line'?"

"I am happy to contribute the correction you ask for," said Temple, haughtily. "Mr. Cutbill is not a member of the diplomatic body, and though such a name might not impossibly be found in the Navy list, you'll scarcely chance upon it at F. O."

"My chief question is, however, still to be answered. On what pretext does he bring him here?" said Jack, with unbroken good humour.

"As to that," broke in Augustus, "Lord Culduff's note is perfectly explanatory; he says his friend is travelling with him; they came here on a matter of business, and, in fact, there would be an awkwardness on his part in separating from him, and on ours, if we did not prevent such a contingency."

"Quite so," chimed in Temple. "Nothing could be more

guarded or courteous than Lord Culduff's reply. It wasn't in the least like an Admiralty minute, Jack, or an order to Commander Spiggins, of the *Snarler*, to take in five hundred firkins of pork."

"I might say, now, that you'll not find that name in the Navy list, Temple," said the sailor, laughing.

"Do they arrive to-day?" asked Marion, not a little uncomfortable at this exchange of tart things.

"To dinner," said Temple.

"I suppose we have seen the last leg of mutton we are to meet with till he goes," cried Jack: "that precious French fellow will now give his genius full play, and we'll have to dine off 'salmis' and 'suprêmes,' or make our dinner off bread-and-cheese."

"Perhaps you would initiate Bertond into the mystery of a sea-pie, Jack," said Temple, with a smile.

"And a precious mess the fellow would make of it! He'd fill it with cocks' combs and mushrooms, and stick two skewers in it with a half-boiled truffle on each—lucky if there wouldn't be a British flag in spun sugar between them; and he'd call the abomination 'pâté à la gun-room,' or some such confounded name."

A low, quiet laugh was now heard from the end of the table, and the company remembered, apparently for the first time, that Mr. Harding, the agent, was there, and very busily engaged with a broiled chicken.

"Ain't I right, Mr. Harding?" cried Jack, as he heard the low chuckle of the small, meek, submissive-looking little man, at the other end of the table.

"Ain't I right?"

"I have met with very good French versions of English cookery abroad, Captain Bramleigh."

"Don't call me 'captain' or I'll suspect your accuracy about the cookery," interrupted Jack. "I fear I'm about as far off that rank as Bertond is from the sea-pie."

"Do you know Cutbill, Harding?" said Augustus, addressing the agent in the tone of an heir expectant.

"Yes. We were both examined in the same case before a committee of the House, and I made his acquaintance then."

"What sort of person is he?" asked Temple.

"Is he jolly, Mr. Harding?—that's the question," cried Jack. "I suspect we shall be overborne by greatness, and a jolly fellow would be a boon from heaven."

"I believe he is what might be called jolly," said Harding, cautiously.

"Jolly sounds like a familiar word for vulgar," said Marion. "I hope Mr. Harding does not mean that."

"Mr. Harding means nothing of that kind, I'll be sworn," broke in Jack. "He means an easy-tempered fellow, amusing and amusable. Well, Nelly, if it's not English, I can't help it—it ought to be; but when one wants ammunition, one takes the first heavy thing at hand. Egad! I'd ram down a minister plenipotentiary, rather than fire blank-cartridge."

"Is Lord Culduff also jolly, Mr. Harding?" asked Eleanor, now looking up with a sparkle in her eye.

"I scarcely know—I have the least possible acquaintance with his lordship; I doubt, indeed, if he will recollect me," said Harding, with diffidence.

"What are we to do with this heavy swell when he comes, is the puzzle to me," said Augustus, gravely. "How is he to be entertained,—how amused? Here's a county with nothing to see—nothing to interest—without a neighbourhood. What *are* we to do with him?"

"The more one is a man of the world, in the best sense of that phrase, the more easily he finds how to shape his life to any and every circumstance," said Temple, with a sententious tone and manner.

"Which means, I suppose, that he'll make the best of a bad case, and bear our tiresomeness with bland urbanity?" said Jack. "Let us only hope, for all our sakes, that his trial may not be a long one."

"Just to think of such a country!" exclaimed Marion; "there is absolutely no one we could have to meet him."

"What's the name of that half-pay captain who called here t'other morning?—the fellow who sat from luncheon till nigh dusk?" asked Jack.

"Captain Craufurd," replied Marion. "I hope nobody thinks of inviting *him*; he is insufferably vulgar, and presuming besides."

"Wasn't that the man, Marion, who told you that as my father and Lady Augusta didn't live together the county gentry couldn't be expected to call on us?" asked Augustus, laughing.

"He did more: he entered into an explanation of the peculiar tenets of the neighbourhood, and told me if we had had the good luck to have settled in the south or west of

Ireland, they'd not have minded it, 'but here,' he added, 'we are great sticklers for morality.'"

"And what reply did you make him, Marion?" asked Jack.

"I was so choked with passion that I couldn't speak, or if I did say anything I have forgotten it. At all events, he set me off laughing immediately after, as he said,—'As for myself, I don't care a rush. I'm a bachelor, and a bachelor can go anywhere.'"

She gave these words with such a close mimicry of his voice and manner, that a general burst of laughter followed them.

"There's the very fellow we want," cried Jack. "That's the man to meet our distinguished guest; he'll not let him escape without a wholesome hint or two."

"I'd as soon see a gentleman exposed to the assault of a mastiff as to the insulting coarseness of such a fellow as that," said Temple, passionately.

"The mischief's done already; I heard the governor say, as he took leave,—'Captain Craufurd, are you too strait-laced to dine out on a Sunday? if not, will you honour us with your company at eight o'clock?' And though he repeated the words 'eight o'clock' with a groan like a protest, he muttered something about being happy, a phrase that evidently cost him dearly, for he went shuffling down the avenue afterwards with his hat over his eyes, and gesticulating with his hands as if some new immorality had suddenly broke in upon his mind."

"You mean to say that he is coming to dinner here next Sunday?" asked Temple, horrified.

"A little tact and good management are always sufficient to keep these sort of men down," said Augustus.

"I hope we don't ask a man to dinner with the intention to 'keep him down,'" said Jack, sturdily.

"At all events," cried Temple, "he need not be presented to Lord Culduff."

"I suspect you will see very little of him after dinner," observed Harding, in his meek fashion. "That wonderful '32 port will prove a detainer impossible to get away from."

"I'll keep him company, then. I rather like to meet one of those cross-grained dogs occasionally."

"Not impossibly you'll learn something more of that same 'public opinion' of our neighbours regarding us," said Marion, haughtily.

"With all my heart," cried the sailor, gaily; "they'll not ruffle my temper, even if they won't flatter my vanity."

"Have you asked the L'Estranges, Marion?" said Augustus.

"We always ask them after church; they are sure to be disengaged," said she. "I wish, Nelly, that you, who are such a dear friend of Julia's, would try and persuade her to wear something else than that eternal black silk. She is so intently bent on being an Andalusian. Some one unluckily said she looked so Spanish, that she has got up the dress, and the little fan coquetry, and the rest of it, in the most absurd fashion."

"Her grandmother was a Spaniard," broke in Nelly, warmly.

"So they say," said the other, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"There's a good deal of style about her," said Temple, with the tone of one who was criticizing what he understood. "She sings prettily."

"Prettily?" groaned Jack. "Why, where, except amongst professionals, did you ever hear her equal?"

"She sings divinely," said Ellen; "and it is, after all, one of her least attractions."

"No heroics, for Heaven's sake; leave that to your brothers, Nelly, who are fully equal to it. I really meant my remark about her gown for good nature."

"She's a nice girl," said Augustus, "though she is certainly a bit of a coquette."

"True; but it's very good coquetry," drawled out Temple. "It's not that jerking, uncertain, unpurpose-like style of affectation your English coquette displays. It is not the eternal demand for attention or admiration. It is simply a desire to please thrown into a thousand little graceful ways, each too slight, and too faint, to be singled out for notice, but making up a whole of wonderful captivation."

"Well done, diplomacy! egad! I didn't know there was that much blood in the Foreign Office," cried Jack, laughing; "and now I'm off to look after my night-lines. I quite forgot all about them till this minute."

"Take me with you, Jack," said Nelly, and hastened after him, hat in hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ARRIVAL OF A GREAT MAN.

It was within a quarter of eight o'clock—forty-five minutes after the usual dinner-hour—when Lord Culduff's carriage drove up to the door.

"The roads are atrocious down here," said Temple, apologizing in advance for an offence which his father rarely, if ever, forgave. "Don't you think you ought to go out to meet him, sir?" asked he, half timidly.

"It would only create more delay; he'll appear, I take it, when he is dressed," was the curt rejoinder, but it was scarcely uttered when the door was thrown wide open, and Lord Culduff and Mr. Cutbill were announced.

Seen in the subdued light of a drawing-room before dinner, Lord Culduff did not appear more than half his real age, and the jaunty stride and the bland smile he wore—as he made his round of acquaintance—might have passed muster for five-and-thirty; nor was the round vulgar figure of the engineer, awkward and familiar alternately, a bad foil for the very graceful attractions of his lordship's manner.

"We should have been here two hours ago," said he, "but my friend here insisted on our coming coastwise to see a wonderful bay—a natural harbour one might call it. What's the name, Cutbill?"

"Portness, my lord."

"Ah, to be sure, Portness. On your property, I believe?"

"I am proud to say it is. I have seen nothing finer in the kingdom," said Bramleigh; "and if Ireland were anything but Ireland, that harbour would be crowded with shipping, and this coast one of the most prosperous and busy shores of the island."

"Who knows if we may not live to see it such? Cutbill's projects are very grand, and I declare that though I deemed them Arabian Night stories a few weeks back, I am a convert now. Another advantage we gained," said

he, turning to Marion; "we came up through a new shrubbery, which we were told had been all planned by you."

"My sister designed it," said she, as she smiled and made a gesture towards Ellen.

"May I offer you my most respectful compliments on your success? I am an enthusiast about landscape-gardening, and though our English climate gives us many a sore rebuff in our attempts, the soil and the varied nature of the surface lend themselves happily to the pursuit. I think you were at the Hague with me, Bramleigh?" asked he of Temple.

"Does he know how late it is?" whispered Augustus to his father. "Does he know we are waiting dinner?"

"I'll tell him," and Colonel Bramleigh walked forward from his place before the fire. "I'm afraid, my lord, the cold air of our hills has not given you an appetite?"

"Quite the contrary, I assure you. I am very hungry."

"By Jove, and so are we!" blurted out Jack; "and it's striking eight this instant."

"What is your dinner-hour?"

"It ought to be seven," answered Jack.

"Why, Cutbill, you told me nine."

Cutbill muttered something below his breath, and turned away; and Lord Culduff laughingly said, "I declare I don't perceive the connection. My friend, Colonel Bramleigh, opines that a French cook always means nine-o'clock dinner. I'm horrified at this delay: let us make a hasty toilette, and repair our fault at once."

"Let me show you where you are lodged," said Temple, not sorry to escape from the drawing-room at a moment when his friend's character and claims were likely to be sharply criticized.

"Cutty's a vulgar dog," said Jack, as they left the room. "But I'll be shot if he's not the best of the two."

A haughty toss of Marion's head showed that she was no concurring party to the sentiment.

"I'm amazed to see so young a man," said Colonel Bramleigh. "In look at least, he isn't forty."

"It's all make-up," cried Jack.

"He can't be a great deal under seventy, taking the list of his services. He was at Vienna as private secretary to Lord Borchester——" As Augustus pronounced the words Lord Culduff entered the room in a fragrance of perfume and a brilliancy of colour that was quite effective; for he wore

his red ribbon, and his blue coat was lined with white silk, and his cheeks glowed with a bloom that youth itself could not rival.

"Who talks of old Borchester?" said he, gaily. "My father used to tell me such stories of him. They sent him over to Hanover once, to report on the available Princesses to marry the Prince: and, egad! he played his part so well that one of them—Princess Helena I think it was—fell in love with him; and if it wasn't that he had been married already,—May I offer my arm?" And the rest of the story was probably told as he led Miss Bramleigh in to dinner.

Mr. Cutbill only arrived as they took their places, and slunk into a seat beside Jack, whom, of all the company, he judged would be the person he could feel most at ease with.

"What a fop!" whispered Jack, with a glance at the peer.

"Isn't he an old humbug?" muttered Cutbill. "Do you know how he managed to appear in so short a time? We stopped two hours at a little inn on the road while he made his toilette; and the whole get-up—paint and padding and all—was done then. The great fur pelisse in which he made his entrance into the drawing-room removed, he was in full dinner-dress underneath. He's the best actor living."

"Have you known him long?"

"Oh, yes! I know all of them," said he, with a little gesture of his hand: "that is, they take devilish good care to know *me*."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Jack, in the tone which seemed to ask for some explanation.

"You see, here's how it is," said Cutbill, as he bent over his plate and talked in a tone cautiously subdued: "All those swells—especially that generation yonder—are pretty nigh aground. They have been living for forty or fifty years at something like five times their income; and if it hadn't been for this sudden rush of prosperity in England, caused by railroads, mines, quarries, or the like, these fellows would have been swept clean away. He's watching me now. I'll go on by-and-by. Have you any good hunting down here, Colonel Bramleigh?" asked he of the host, who sat half hid by a massive centrepiece.

"You'll have to ask my sons what it's like; and I take it they'll give you a mount too."

"With pleasure, Mr. Cutbill," cried Augustus. "If we have no frost, we'll show you some sport on Monday next."

"Delighted,—I like hunting of all things."

"And you, my lord, is it a favourite sport of yours?" asked Temple.

"A long life out of England—which has unfortunately been my case—makes a man sadly out of gear in all these things; but I ride, of course," and he said the last words as though he meant to imply "because I do everything."

"I'll send over to L'Estrange," said Augustus; "he's sure to know where the meet is for Monday."

"Who is L'Estrange?" asked his lordship.

"Our curate here," replied Colonel Bramleigh, smiling. "An excellent fellow, and a very agreeable neighbour."

"Our only one, by Jove!" cried Jack.

"How gallant to forget Julia!" said Nelly, tartly.

"And the fair Julia,—who is she?" asked Lord Culduff.

"L'Estrange's sister," replied Augustus.

"And now, my lord," chimed in Jack, "you know the whole neighbourhood, if we don't throw in a cross-grained old fellow, a half-pay lieutenant of the Buffs."

"Small but select," said Lord Culduff, quietly. "May I venture to ask you, Colonel Bramleigh, what determined you in your choice of a residence here?"

"I suppose I must confess it was mainly a money consideration. The bank held some rather heavy mortgages over this property, which they were somewhat disposed to consider as capable of great improvement, and as I was growing a little wearied of City life, I fancied I'd come over here and——"

"Regenerate Ireland, eh?"

"Or, at least, live very economically," added he, laughing.

"I may be permitted to doubt that part of the experiment," said Lord Culduff, as his eyes ranged over the table, set forth in all the splendour that plate and glass could bestow.

"I suspect papa means a relative economy," said Marion, "something very different from our late life in England."

"Yes, my last three years have been very costly ones," said Colonel Bramleigh, sighing. "I lost heavily by the sale of Earlshope, and my unfortunate election, too, was an expensive business. It will take some retrenchment to make up for all this. I tell the boys they'll have to sell their

hunters, or be satisfied, like the parson, to hunt one day a week." The self-complacent, mock humility of this speech was all too apparent.

"I take it," said Culduff, authoritatively, "that every gentleman"—and he laid a marked emphasis on the "gentleman"—"must at some period or the other of his life have spent more money than he ought—more than was subsequently found to be convenient."

"I have repeatedly done so," broke in Cutbill, "and invariably been sorry for it afterwards, inasmuch as each time one does it the difficulty increases."

"Harder to get credit, you mean?" cried Jack, laughing.

"Just so; and one's friends get tired of helping one. Just as they told me, there was a fellow at Blackwall used to live by drowning himself. He was regularly fished up once a week, and stomach-pumped and 'cordialled' and hot-blanketed, and brought round by the Humane Society's people, till at last they came to discover the dodge, and refused to restore him any more; and now he's reduced to earn his bread as a water-bailiff—cruel hard on a fellow of such an ingenious turn of mind."

While the younger men laughed at Cutbill's story, Lord Culduff gave him a reproving glance from the other end of the table, palpably intended to recall him to a more sedate and restricted conviviality.

"Are we not to accompany you?" said Lord Culduff to Marion, as she and her sister arose to retire. "Is this barbarism of sitting after dinner maintained here?"

"Only till we finish this decanter of claret, my lord," said Colonel Bramleigh, who caught what was not intended for his ears.

"Ask the governor to give you a cigar," whispered Jack to Cutbill; "he has some rare Cubans."

"Now, this is what I call regular jolly," said Cutbill, as he drew a small spider table to his side, and furnished himself with a glass and a decanter of Madeira, "and," added he in a whisper to Jack, "let us not be in a hurry to leave it. We only want one thing to be perfect, Colonel Bramleigh."

"If I can only supply it, pray command me, Mr. Cutbill."

"I want this, then," said Cutbill, pursing up his mouth at one side, while he opened the other as if to emit the smoke of a cigar.

"Do you mean smoking?" asked Colonel Bramleigh, in a half-irritable tone.

"You have it."

"Are you a smoker, my lord?" asked the host, turning to Lord Culduff.

"A very moderate one. A cigarette after breakfast, and another at bed time, are about my excesses in that direction."

"Then I'm afraid I must defraud you of the full measure of your enjoyment, Mr. Cutbill; we never smoke in the dining-room. Indeed, I myself have a strong aversion to tobacco, and though I have consented to build a smoking-room, it is as far off from me as I have been able to contrive it."

"And what about his choice Cubans, eh?" whispered Cutbill to Jack.

"All hypocrisy. You'll find a box of them in your dressing-room," said Jack, in an undertone, "when you go upstairs."

Temple now led his distinguished friend into those charming pasturages where the flocks of diplomacy love to dwell, and where none other save themselves could find herbage. Nor was it amongst great political events, of peace or war, alliances or treaties, they wandered—for perhaps in these the outer world, taught as they are by newspapers, might have taken some interest and some share. No; their talk was all of personalities, of Russian princes and grandees of Spain, archduchesses and "marchesas," whose crafts and subtleties, and pomps and vanities, make up a world like no other world, and play a drama of life—happily it may be for humanity—like no other drama that other men and women ever figured in. Now it is a strange fact—and I appeal to my readers if their experience will not corroborate mine—that when two men thoroughly versed in these themes will talk together upon them, exchanging their stories and mingling their comments, the rest of the company will be struck with a perfect silence, unable to join in the subject discussed, and half ashamed to introduce any ordinary matter into such high and distinguished society. And thus Lord Culduff and Temple went on for full an hour or more, pelting each other with little court scandals and small state intrigues, till Colonel Bramleigh fell asleep, and Cutbill, having finished his Madeira, would probably have followed his host's example, when a servant announced tea, adding, in a whisper, that Mr. L'Estrange and his sister were in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IX.

OVER THE FIRE.

In a large room, comfortably furnished, but in which there was a certain blending of the articles of the drawing-room with those of the dining-room, showing unmistakably the bachelor character of the owner, sat two young men at opposite sides of an ample fireplace. One sat, or rather reclined, on a small leather sofa, his bandaged leg resting on a pillow, and his pale and somewhat shrunken face evidencing the results of pain and confinement to the house. His close-cropt head and square-cut beard, and a certain mingled drollery and fierceness in the eyes, proclaimed him French, and so M. Anatole Pracontal was; though it would have been difficult to declare as much from his English, which he spoke with singular purity and the very faintest peculiarity of accent.

Opposite him sat a tall well-built man of about thirty-four or five, with regular and almost handsome features, marred, indeed, in expression by the extreme closeness of the eyes, and a somewhat long upper lip, which latter defect an incipient moustache was already concealing. The colour of his hair was, however, that shade of auburn which verges on red, and is so commonly accompanied by a much freckled skin. This same hair, and hands and feet almost enormous in size, were the afflictions which imparted bitterness to a lot which many regarded as very enviable in life; for Mr. Philip Longworth was his own master, free to go where he pleased, and the owner of a very sufficient fortune. He had been brought up at Oscot, and imbibed, with a very fair share of knowledge, a large stock of that general mistrust and suspicion which is the fortune of those entrusted to priestly teaching, and which, though he had travelled largely and mixed freely with the world, still continued to cling to his manner, which might be characterized by the one word—furtive.

Longworth had only arrived that day for dinner, and the two friends were now exchanging their experience since they

had parted some eight months before at the second cataract of the Nile.

"And so, Pracontal, you never got one of my letters?"

"Not one,—on my honour. Indeed, if it were not that I learned by a chance meeting with a party of English tourists at Cannes that they had met you at Cairo, I'd have begun to suspect you had taken a plunge into the Nile, or into Mohammedom, for which latter you were showing some disposition, you remember, when we parted."

"True enough; and if one was sure never to turn westward again, there are many things in favour of the turban. It is the most sublime conception of egotism possible to imagine."

"Egotism is a mistake, *mon cher*," said the other; "a man's own heart, make it as comfortable as he may, is too small an apartment to live in. I do not say this in any grand benevolent spirit. There's no humbug of philanthropy in the opinion."

"Of that I'm fully assured," said Longworth, with a gravity which made the other laugh.

"No," continued he, still laughing. "I want a larger field, a wider hunting-ground for my diversion than my own nature."

"A disciple, in fact, of your great model, Louis Napoleon. You incline to annexations. By the way, how fares it with your new projects? Have you seen the lawyer I gave you the letter to?"

"Yes. I stayed eight days in town to confer with him. I heard from him this very day."

"Well, what says he?"

"His letter is a very savage one. He is angry with me for having come here at all; and particularly angry because I have broken my leg, and can't come away."

"What does he think of your case, however?"

"He thinks it manageable. He says—as of course I knew he would say—that it demands most cautious treatment and great acuteness. There are blanks, historical blanks, to be filled up; links to connect, and such like, which will demand some time and some money. I have told him I have an inexhaustible supply of the one, but for the other I am occasionally slightly pinched."

"It promises well, however?"

"Most hopefully. And when once I have proved myself —not always so easy as it seems—the son of my father, I am to go over and see him again in consultation."

"Kelson is a man of station and character, and if he undertakes your cause it is in itself a strong guarantee of its goodness."

"Why, these men take all that is offered them. They no more refuse a bad suit than a doctor rejects a hopeless patient."

"And so will a doctor, if he happen to be an honest man," said Longworth, half peevishly. "Just as he would also refuse to treat one who would persist in following his own caprices in defiance of all advice."

"Which touches me. Is not it so?" said the other, laughing. "Well, I think I ought to have stayed quietly here, and not shown myself in public. All the more, since it has cost me this," and he pointed to his leg as he spoke. "But I can't help confessing it, Philip, the sight of those fellows in their gay scarlet, caracolling over the sward, and popping over the walls and hedges, provoked me. It was exactly like a challenge; so I felt it, at least. It was as though they said, 'What! you come here to pit your claims against ours, and you are still not gentleman enough to meet us in a fair field and face the same perils that we do.' And this, be it remembered, to one who had served in a cavalry regiment, and made campaigns with the Chasseurs d'Afrique. I couldn't stand it, and after the second day I mounted, and——" a motion of his hand finished the sentence.

"All that sort of reasoning is so totally different from an Englishman's that I am unable even to discuss it. I do not pretend to understand the refined sensibility that resents provocations which were never offered."

"I know you don't, and I know your countrymen do not either. You are such a practical people that your very policemen never interfere with a criminal till he has fully committed himself."

"In plain words, we do not content ourselves with inferences. But tell me, did any of these people call to see you, or ask after you?"

"Yes, they sent the day after my disaster, and they also told the doctor to say how happy they should be if they could be of service to me. And a young naval commander,—his card is yonder,—came, I think, three times, and would have come up if I had wished to receive him; but Kelson's letter, so angry about my great indiscretion, as he called it, made me decline the visit, and confine my acknowledgment to thanks."

"I wonder what my old gatekeeper thought when he saw

them, or their liveries, in this avenue?" said Longworth, with a peculiar bitterness in his tone.

"Why, what should he think,—was there any feud between the families?"

"How could there be? These people have not been many months in Ireland. What I meant was with reference to the feud that is six centuries old, the old open ulcer, that makes all rule in this country a struggle, and all resistance to it a patriotism. Don't you know," asked he, almost sternly, "that I am a Papist?"

"Yes, you told me so."

"And don't you know that my religion is not a mere barrier to my advancement in many careers of life, but is a social disqualification—that it is, like the trace of black blood in a creole, a ban excluding him from intercourse with his better-born neighbours—that I belong to a class just as much shut out from all the relations of society as were the Jews in the fifteenth century?"

"I remember that you told me so once, but I own I never fully comprehended it, nor understood how the question of a man's faith was to decide his standing in this world, and that, being the equal of those about you in birth and condition, your religion should stamp you with inferiority."

"But I did not tell you I was their equal," said Longworth, with a slow and painful distinctness. "We are *novi homines* here; a couple of generations back we were peasants—as poor as anything you could see out of that window. By hard work and some good luck—of course there was luck in it—we emerged, and got enough together to live upon, and I was sent to a costly school, and then to college, that I might start in life the equal of my fellows. But what avails it all? To hold a station in life, to mix with the world, to associate with men educated and brought up like myself, I must quit my own country and live abroad. I know, I see, you can make nothing of this. It is out and out incomprehensible. You made a clean sweep of these things with your great Revolution of '93. Ours is yet to come."

"Per Dio! I'd not stand it," cried the other, passionately.

"You couldn't help it. You must stand it; at least, till such time as a good many others, equally aggrieved as yourself, resolve to risk something to change it; and this is remote enough, for there is nothing that men—I mean educated and cultivated men—are more averse to, than any open confession of feeling a social disqualification. I may

tell it to you here, as we sit over the fire, but I'll not go out and proclaim it, I promise you. These are confessions one keeps for the fireside."

"And will not these people visit you?"

"Nothing less likely."

"Nor you call upon them?"

"Certainly not."

"And will you continue to live within an hour's drive of each other without acquaintance or recognition?"

"Probably—at least we may salute when we meet."

"Then I say the guillotine has done more for civilization than the schoolmaster," cried the other. "And all this because you are a Papist?"

"Just so. I belong to a faith so deeply associated with a bygone inferiority that I am not to be permitted to emerge from it—there's the secret of it all."

"I'd rebel. I'd descend into the streets!"

"And you'd get hanged for your pains."

A shrug of the shoulders was all the reply, and Longworth went on:—

"Some one once said, 'It was better economy in a state to teach people not to steal than to build gaols for the thieves;' and so I would say to our rulers it would be cheaper to give us some of the things we ask for than to enact all the expensive measures that are taken to repress us."

"What chance have I, then, of justice in such a country?" cried the foreigner, passionately.

"Better than in any land of Europe. Indeed I will go further, and say it is the one land in Europe where corruption is impossible on the seat of judgment. If you make out your claim, as fully as you detailed it to me, if evidence will sustain your allegations, your flag will as certainly wave over that high tower yonder as that decanter stands there."

"Here's to *la bonne chance*," said the other, filling a bumper and drinking it off.

"You will need to be very prudent, very circumspect: two things which I suspect will cost you some trouble," said Longworth. "The very name you will have to go by will be a difficulty. To call yourself Bramleigh will be an open declaration of war; to write yourself Pracontal is an admission that you have no claim to the other appellation."

"It was my mother's name. She was of a Provençal family, and the Pracontals were people of good blood."

"But your father was always called Bramleigh?"

"My father, *mon cher*, had fifty aliases; he was Louis Lagrange under the Empire, Victor Cassagnac at the Restoration, Carlo Salvi when sentenced to the galleys at Naples, Niccolo Baldassare when he shot the Austrian colonel at Capua, and I believe when he was last heard of, the captain of a slaver, he was called, for shortness' sake, 'Brutto,' for he was not personally attractive."

"Then when and where was he known as Bramleigh?"

"Whenever he wrote to England. Whenever he asked for money, which, on the whole, was pretty often, he was Montagu Bramleigh."

"To whom were these letters addressed?"

"To his father, Montagu Bramleigh, Portland Place, London. I have it all in my note-book."

"And these appeals were responded to?"

"Not so satisfactorily as one might wish. The replies were flat refusals to give money, and rather unpleasant menaces as to police measures if the insistance were continued."

"You have some of these letters?"

"The lawyer has, I think, four of them. The last contained a bank order for five hundred francs, payable to Giacomo Lami, or order."

"Who was Lami?"

"Lami was the name of my grandmother; her father was Giacomo. He was the old fresco-painter who came over from Rome to paint the walls of that great house yonder, and it was his daughter that Bramleigh married."

"Which Bramleigh was the father of the present possessor of Castello?"

"Precisely. Montagu Bramleigh married my grandmother here in Ireland, and when the troubles broke out, either to save her father from the laws or to get rid of him, managed to smuggle him out of the country over to Holland —the last supposition, and the more likely, is that he sent his wife off with her father."

"What evidence is there of this marriage?"

"It was registered in some parish authority; at least so old Giacomo's journal records, for we have the journal, and without it we might never have known of our claim; but besides that, there are two letters of Montagu Bramleigh's to my grandmother, written when he had occasion to leave her about ten days after their marriage, and they begin, 'My

dearest wife,' and are signed, 'Your affectionate husband, M. Bramleigh.' The lawyer has all these."

"How did it come about that a rich London banker, as Bramleigh was, should ally himself with the daughter of a working Italian tradesman?"

"Here's the story as conveyed by old Giacomo's notes. Bramleigh came over here to look after the progress of the works for a great man, a bishop and a lord marquis too, who was the owner of the place; he made the acquaintance of Lami and his daughters: there were two; the younger only a child, however. The eldest, Enrichetta, was very beautiful, so beautiful indeed, that Giacomo was eternally introducing her head into all his frescoes; she was a blonde Italian, and made a most lovely Madonna. Old Giacomo's journal mentions no less than eight altar-pieces where she figures, not to say that she takes her place pretty frequently in heathen society also, and if I be rightly informed, she is the centre figure of a 'fresco' in this very house of Castello, in a small octagon tower, the whole of which Lami painted with his own hand. Bramleigh fell in love with this girl and married her."

"But she was a Catholic."

"No. Lami was originally a Waldensian, and held some sort of faith, I don't exactly know what, that claimed affinity with the English Church; at all events, the vicar here, a certain Robert Mathews—his name is in the precious journal—married them, and man and wife they were."

"When and how did all these facts come to your knowledge?"

"As to the when and the how, the same answer will suffice. I was serving as sous-lieutenant of cavalry in Africa when news reached me that the *Astradella*, the ship in which my father sailed, was lost off the Cape Verde islands, with all on board. I hastened off to Naples, where a Mr. Bolton lived, who was chief owner of the vessel, to hear what tidings had reached him of the disaster, and to learn something of my father's affairs, for he had been, if I might employ so fine a word for so small a function, his banker for years. Indeed, but for Bolton's friendship and protection—how earned I never knew—my father would have come to grief years before, for he was a thorough Italian, and always up to the neck in conspiracies; he had been in that Bonapartist affair at Rome; was a Carbonaro and a Camorrist, and Heaven knows what besides. And though Bolton was a man very unlikely

to sympathize with these opinions, I take it my respected parent must have been a *bon diable* that men who knew him would not willingly see wrecked and ruined. Bolton was most kind to myself personally. He received me with many signs of friendship, and without troubling me with any more details of law than were positively unavoidable, put me in possession of the little my father had left behind him, which consisted of a few hundred francs of savings and an old chest, with some older clothes and a mass of papers and letters—dangerous enough, as I discovered, to have compromised scores of people—and a strange old manuscript book, clasped and locked, called the *Diary of Giacomo Lami*, with matter in it for half a dozen romances; for Giacomo, too, had the conspirator's taste, had known Danton intimately, and was deep in the confidence of all the Irish republicans who were affiliated with the French revolutionary party. But besides this the book contained a quantity of original letters; and when mention was made in the text of this or that event, the letter which related to it, or replied to some communication about it, was appended in the original. I made this curious volume my study for weeks, till, in fact, I came to know far more about old Giacomo and his times than I ever knew about my father and his epoch. There was not a country in Europe in which he had not lived, nor, I believe, one in which he had not involved himself in some trouble. He loved his art, but he loved political plotting and conspiracy even more, and was ever ready to resign his most profitable engagement for a scheme that promised to overturn a government or unthrone a sovereign. My first thought on reading his curious reminiscences was to make them the basis of a memoir for publication. Of course they were fearfully indiscreet, and involved reputations that no one had ever thought of assailing; but they were chiefly of persons dead and gone, and it was only their memory that could suffer. I spoke to Bolton about this. He approved of the notion, principally as a means of helping me to a little money, which I stood much in need of, and gave me a letter to a friend in Paris, the well-known publisher, Lecoq, of the Rue St. Honoré.

"As I was dealing with a man of honour and high character, I had no scruple in leaving the volume of old Giacomo's memoirs in Lecoq's hands; and after about a week I returned to learn what he thought of it. He was frank enough to say that no such diary had ever come before him—that it cleared

up a vast number of points hitherto doubtful and obscure, and showed an amount of knowledge of the private life of the period absolutely marvellous; 'but,' said he, 'it would never do to make it public. Most of these men are now forgotten, it is true, but their descendants remain, and live in honour amongst us. What a terrible scandal it would be to proclaim to the world that of these people many were illegitimate, many in the enjoyment of large fortunes to which they had not a shadow of a title; in fact,' said he, 'it would be to hurl a live shell in the very midst of society, leaving the havoc and destruction it might cause to blind chance. But,' added he, 'it strikes me there is a more profitable use the volume might be put to. Have you read the narrative of your grandmother's marriage in Ireland with that rich Englishman?' I owned I had read it carelessly, and without bestowing much interest on the theme. 'Go back and re-read it,' said he, 'and come and talk it over with me to-morrow evening.' As I entered his room the next night he arose ceremoniously from his chair, and said, in a tone of well-assumed obsequiousness, 'Si je ne me trompe pas, j'ai l'honneur de voir Monsieur Bramleigh, n'est-ce pas?' I laughed, and replied, 'Je ne m'y oppose pas, monsieur;' and we at once launched out into the details of the story, of which each of us had formed precisely the same opinion.

"Ill luck would have it, that as I went back to my lodgings on that night I should meet Bertani, and Varese, and Manini, and be persuaded to go and sup with them. They were all suspected by the police, from their connection with Fieschi; and on the morning after I received an order from the Minister of War to join my regiment at Oran, and an intimation that my character being fully known it behoved me to take care. I gave no grounds for more stringent measures towards me. I understood the 'caution,' and, not wishing to compromise M. Lecoq, who had been so friendly in all his relations with me, I left France, without even an opportunity of getting back my precious volume, which I never saw again till I revisited Paris eight years after, having given in my démission from the service. Lecoq obtained for me that small appointment I held under M. Lesseps in Egypt, and which I had given up a few weeks before I met you on the Nile. I ought to tell you that Lecoq, for what reason I can't tell, was not so fully persuaded that my claim was as direct as he had at first thought it; and indeed his advice to me was rather to address myself seriously to some means of

livelihood, or to try and make some compromise with the Bramleighs, with whom he deemed a mere penniless pretender would not have the smallest chance of success. I hesitated a good deal over his counsel. There was much in it that weighed with me, perhaps convinced me: but I was always more or less of a gambler, and more than once have I risked a stake, which, if I lost, would have left me penniless; and at last I resolved to say, *Va Banque*, here goes; all or nothing. There's my story, *mon cher*, without any digressions, even one of which, if I had permitted myself to be led into it, would have proved twice as long."

"The strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest link, the engineers tell us," said Longworth, "and it is the same with evidence. I'd like to hear what Kelson says of the case."

"That I can scarcely give you. His last letter to me is full of questions which I cannot answer; but you shall read it for yourself. Will you send upstairs for my writing-desk?"

"We'll con that over to-morrow after breakfast, when our heads will be clearer and brighter. Have you old Lami's journal with you?"

"No. All my papers are with Kelson. The only thing I have here is a sketch in coloured chalk of my grandmother, in her eighteenth year, as a Flora, and, from the date, it must have been done in Ireland, when Giacomo was working at the frescoes."

"That my father," said Pracontal, after a pause, "counted with certainty on this succession, all his own papers show, as well as the care he bestowed on my early education, and the importance he attached to my knowing and speaking English perfectly. But my father cared far more for a conspiracy than a fortune. He was one of those men who only seem to live when they are confronted by a great danger, and I believe there has not been a great plot in Europe these last five-and-thirty years without his name being in it. He was twice handed over to the French authorities by the English Government, and there is some reason to believe that the Bramleighs were the secret instigators of the extradition. There was no easier way of getting rid of his claims."

"These are disabilities which do not attach to you."

"No, thank Heaven. I have gone no farther with these men than mere acquaintance. I know them all, and they know me well enough to know that I deem it the greatest

disaster of my life that my father was one of them. It is not too much to say that a small part of the energy he bestowed on schemes of peril and ruin would have sufficed to have vindicated his claim to wealth and fortune."

"You told me, I think, that Kelson hinted at the possibility of some compromise,—something which, sparing *them* the penalty of publicity, would still secure to *you* an ample fortune."

"Yes. What he said was, 'Juries are, with all their honesty of intention, capricious things to trust to;' and that, not being rich enough to suffer repeated defeats, an adverse verdict might be fatal to me. I didn't like the reasoning altogether, but I was so completely in his hands that I forbore to make any objection, and so the matter remained."

"I suspect he was right," said Longworth, thoughtfully. "At the same time, the case must be strong enough to promise victory, to sustain the proposal of a compromise."

"And if I can show the game in my hand why should I not claim the stakes?"

"Because the other party may delay the settlement. They may challenge the cards, accuse you of 'a rook,' put out the lights—anything, in short, that shall break up the game."

"I see," said Pracontal, gravely; "the lawyer's notion may be better than I thought it."

A long silence ensued between them, then Longworth, looking at his watch, exclaimed, "Who'd believe it? It wants only a few minutes to two o'clock. Good-night."

CHAPTER X.

THE DROPPINGS OF A GREAT DIPLOMATIST.

When a man's manner and address are very successful with the world—when he possesses that power of captivation which extends to people of totally different tastes and habits, and is equally at home, equally at his ease, with young and old, with men of grave pursuits and men of pleasure—it is somewhat hard to believe that there must not be some strong sterling quality in his nature; for we know that the base metals never bear gilding, and that it is only a waste of gold to cover them with it.

It would be, therefore, very pleasant to think that if people should not be altogether as admirable as they were agreeable, yet that the qualities which made the companionship so delighful should be indications of deeper and more solid gifts beneath. Yet I am afraid the theory will not hold. I suspect that there are a considerable number of people in this world who go through life trading on credit, and who renew their bills with humanity so gracefully and so cleverly, they are never found out to be bankrupts till they die.

A very accomplished specimen of this order was Lord Culduff. He was a man of very ordinary abilities, commonplace in every way, and who had yet contrived to impress the world with the notion of his capacity. He did a little of almost everything. He sang a little, played a little on two or three instruments, talked a little of several languages, and had smatterings of all games and field-sports, so that, to every seeming, nothing came amiss to him. Nature had been gracious to him personally, and he had a voice very soft and low and insinuating.

He was not an impostor, for the simple reason that he believed in himself. He actually had negotiated his false coinage so long that he got to regard it as bullion, and imagined himself to be one of the first men of his age.

The bad bank-note, which has been circulating freely from hand to hand, no sooner comes under the scrutiny of a

sharp-eyed functionary of the bank than it is denounced and branded; and so Culduff would speedily have been treated by any one of those keen men who, as Ministers, grow to acquire a knowledge of human nature as thorough as of the actual events of the time.

The world at large, however, had not this estimate of him. They read of him as a special envoy here, an extraordinary minister there, now negotiating a secret treaty, now investing a Pasha of Egypt with the Bath; and they deemed him not only a trusty servant of the Crown, but a skilled negotiator, a deep and accomplished diplomatist.

He was a little short-sighted, and it enabled him to pass objectionable people without causing offence. He was slightly deaf, and it gave him an air of deference in conversation which many were charmed with; for whenever he failed to catch what was said, his smile was perfectly captivating. It was assent, but dashed with a sort of sly flattery, as though it was to the speaker's ingenuity he yielded, as much as to the force of the conviction.

He was a great favourite with women. Old ladies regarded him as a model of good *ton;* younger ones discovered other qualities in him that amused them as much. His life had been anything but blameless, but he had contrived to make the world believe he was more sinned against than sinning, and that every mischance that befell him came of that unsuspecting nature and easy disposition of which even all his experience of life could not rob him.

Cutbill read him thoroughly: but though Lord Culduff saw this, it did not prevent him trying all his little pretty devices of pleasing on the man of culverts and cuttings. In fact, he seemed to feel that though he could not bring down the bird, it was better not to spoil his gun by a change of cartridge, and so he fired away his usual little pleasantries, well aware that none of them were successful.

He had now been three days with the Bramleighs, and certainly had won the suffrages, though in different degrees, of them all. He had put himself so frankly and unreservedly in Colonel Bramleigh's hands about the coal-mine, candidly confessing the whole thing was new to him, he was a child in money matters, that the banker was positively delighted with him.

With Augustus he had talked politics confidentially,—not questions of policy nor statecraft, not matters of legislation or government, but the more subtle and ingenious points as

to what party a young man entering life ought to join, what set he should attach himself to, and what line he should take to ensure future distinction and office. He was well up in the gossip of the House, and knew who was disgusted with such an one, and why so-and-so "wouldn't stand it" any longer.

To Temple Bramleigh he was charming. Of the "line," as they love to call it, he knew positively everything. Nor was it merely how this or that legation was conducted, how this man got on with his chief, or why that other had asked to be transferred: but he knew all the mysterious goings-on of that wonderful old repository they call "the Office." "That's what you must look to, Bramleigh," he would say, clapping him on the shoulder. "The men who make plenipos and envoys are not in the Cabinet, nor do they dine at Osborne; they are fellows in seedy black, with brown umbrellas, who cross the Green Park every morning about eleven o'clock, and come back over the self-same track by six of an evening. Staid old dogs, with crape on their hats, and hard lines round their mouths, fond of fresh caviare from Russia, and much given to cursing the messengers."

He was, in a word, the incarnation of a very well-bred selfishness, that had learned how much it redounds to a man's personal comfort that he is popular, and that even a weak swimmer who goes with the tide, makes a better figure than the strongest and bravest who attempts to stem the current. He was, in his way, a keen observer; and a certain haughty tone, a kind of self-assertion in Marion's manner, so distinguished her from her sister, that he set Cutbill to ascertain if it had any other foundation than mere temperament; and the wily agent was not long in learning that a legacy of twenty thousand pounds in her own absolute right from her mother's side accounted for these pretensions.

"I tell you, Cutty, it's only an old diplomatist, like myself, would have detected the share that bank debentures had in that girl's demeanour. Confess, sir, it was a clever hit."

"It was certainly neat, my lord."

"It was more, Cutty; it was deep—downright deep. I saw where the idiosyncrasy stopped, and where the dividends came in."

Cutbill smiled an approving smile, and his lordship turned to the glass over the chimney-piece and looked admiringly at himself.

"Was it twenty thousand you said?" asked he, indolently.

"Yes, my lord, twenty. Her father will probably give her as much more. Harding told me yesterday that all the younger children are to have share and share alike—no distinction made between sons and daughters."

"So that she'll have what a Frenchman would call 'un million de dot.'"

"Just about what we want, my lord, to start our enterprise."

"Ah, yes. I suppose that would do; but we shall do this by a company, Cutty. Have you said anything to Bramleigh yet on the subject?"

"Nothing further than what I told you yesterday. I gave him the papers with the surveys and the specifications, and he said he'd look over them this morning, and that I might drop in upon him to-night in the library after ten. It is the time he likes best for a little quiet chat."

"He seems a very cautious, I'd almost say, a timid man."

"The city men are all like that, my lord. They're always cold enough in entering on a project, though they'll go rashly on after they've put their money in it."

"What's the eldest son?"

"A fool—just a fool. He urged his father to contest a county, to lay a claim for a peerage. They lost the election and lost their money; but Augustus Bramleigh persists in thinking that the party are still their debtors."

"Very hard to make Ministers believe that," said Culduff, with a grin. "A vote in the House is like a bird in the hand. The second fellow, Temple, is a poor creature."

"Ain't he? Not that he thinks so."

"No; they never do," said Culduff, caressing his whiskers, and looking pleasantly at himself in the glass. "They see one or two men of mark in their career, and they fancy—Heaven knows why—that they must be like them; that identity of pursuit implies equality of intellect; and so these creatures spread out their little sails, and imagine they are going to make a grand voyage."

"But Miss Bramleigh told me yesterday you had a high opinion of her brother Temple."

"I believe I said so," said he, with a soft smile. "One says these sort of things every day, irresponsibly, Cutty, irresponsibly, just as one gives his autograph, but would think twice before signing his name on a stamped paper."

Mr. Cutbill laughed at this sally, and seemed by the motion of his lips as though he were repeating it to himself for

future retail; but in what spirit, it would not be safe perhaps to inquire.

Though Lord Culduff did not present himself at the family breakfast-table, and but rarely appeared at luncheon, pretexting that his mornings were always given up to business and letter-writing, he usually came down in the afternoon in some toilet admirably suited to the occasion, whatever it might be, of riding, driving, or walking. In fact, a mere glance at his lordship's costume would have unmistakably shown whether a canter, the croquêt lawn, or a brisk walk through the shrubberies, were in the order of the day.

"Do you remember, Cutty," said he, suddenly, "what was my engagement for this morning? I promised somebody to go somewhere and do something; and I'll be shot if I can recollect."

"I am totally unable to assist your lordship," said the other, with a smile. "The young men, I know, are out shooting, and Miss Eleanor Bramleigh is profiting by the snow to have a day's sledging. She proposed to me to join her, but I didn't see it."

"Ah! I have it now, Cutty. I was to walk over to Portshandon, to return the curate's call. Miss Bramleigh was to come with me."

"It was scarcely gallant, my lord, to forget so charming a project," said the other, slyly.

"Gallantry went out, Cutty, with slashed doublets. The height and the boast of our modern civilization is to make women our perfect equals, and to play the game of life with them on an absolutely equal footing."

"Is that quite fair?"

"I protest I think it is. Except in a few rare instances, where the men unite to the hardier qualities of the masculine intelligence, the nicer, finer, most susceptible instincts of the other sex—the organization that more than any other touches on excellence—except, I say, in these cases, the women have the best of it. Now what chance, I ask you, would *you* have, pitted against such a girl as the elder Bramleigh?"

"I'm afraid a very poor one," said Cutbill, with a look of deep humility.

"Just so, Cutty, a very poor one. I give you my word of honour I have learned more diplomacy beside the drawing-room fire than I ever acquired in the pages of the blue-books. You see it's a quite different school of fence they

practise; the thrusts are different and the guards are different. A day for furs essentially, a day for furs," broke he in, as he drew on a coat lined with sable, and profusely braided and ornamented. "What was I saying? where were we?"

"You were talking of women, my lord."

"The faintest tint of scarlet in the under vest—it was a device of the Regent's in his really great day—is always effective in cold, bright, frosty weather. The tint is carried on to the cheek, and adds brilliancy to the eye. In duller weather a coral pin in the cravat will suffice; but, as David Wilkie used to say, 'Nature must have her bit of red.'"

"I wish you would finish what you were saying about women, my lord. Your remarks were full of originality."

"Finish! finish, Cutty! It would take as many volumes as the 'Abridgement of the Statutes' to contain one-half of what I could say about them; and, after all, it would be Sanscrit to you." His lordship now placed his hat on his head, slightly on one side. It was the "tigerism" of a past period, and which he could no more abandon than he could give up the jaunty swagger of his walk, or the bland smile which he kept ready for recognition.

"I have not, I rejoice to say, arrived at that time of life when I can affect to praise bygones; but I own, Cutty, they did everything much better five-and-twenty years ago than now. They dined better, they dressed better, they drove better, they turned out better in the field and in the park, and they talked better."

"How do you account for this, my lord?"

"Simply in this way, Cutty. We have lowered our standard in taste just as we have lowered our standard for the army. We take fellows five feet seven into grenadier companies now; that is, we admit into society men of mere wealth—the banker, the brewer, the railway director, and the rest of them; and with these people we admit their ways, their tastes, their very expressions. I know it is said that we gain in breadth: yet, as I told Lord Cocklethorpe (the mot had its success), what we gain in breadth, said I, we lose in height. Neat, Cutty, wasn't it? As neat as a mot well can be in our clumsy language."

And with this, and a familiar "Bye-bye," he strolled away, leaving Cutbill to practise before the glass such an imitation of him as might serve, at some future time, to convulse with laughter a select and admiring audience.

CHAPTER XI.

A WINTER DAY'S WALK.

Lord Culduff and Marion set out for their walk. It was a sharp frosty morning, with a blue sky above and crisp snow beneath. We have already seen that his lordship had not been inattentive to the charms of costume. Marion was no less so; her dark silk dress, looped over a scarlet petticoat, and a tasteful hat of black astracan, well suited the character of looks where the striking and brilliant were as conspicuous as dark eyes, long lashes, and a bright complexion could make them.

"I'll take you by the shrubberies, my lord, which is somewhat longer, but pleasanter walking, and, if you like it, we'll come back by the hill path, which is much shorter."

"The longer the road the more of your company, Miss Bramleigh. Therein lies my chief interest," said he, bowing.

They talked away pleasantly as they went along, of the country and the scenery, of which new glimpses continually presented themselves, and of the country people and their ways, so new to each of them. They agreed wonderfully on almost everything, but especially as to the character of the Irish —so simple, so confiding, so trustful, so grateful for benefits, and so eager to be well governed! They knew it all, the whole complex web of Irish difficulty and English misrule was clear and plain before them; and then, as they talked, they gained a height from which the blue broad sea was visible, and thence descried a solitary sail afar off, that set them speculating on what the island might become when commerce and trade should visit her, and rich cargoes should cumber her quays, and crowd her harbours. Marion was strong in her knowledge of industrial resources; but as an accomplished aide-de-camp always rides a little behind his chief, so did she restrain her acquaintance with these topics, and keep them slightly to the rear of all his lordship advanced. And then he grew confidential, and talked of coal, which ultimately led him to himself, the theme of all he liked the best. And how differently

did he talk now! What vigour and animation, what spirit did he not throw into his sketch! It was the story of a great man, unjustly, hardly dealt with, persecuted by an ungenerous rivalry, the victim of envy. For half, ay, for the tithe of what he had done, others had got their advancement in the peerage—their blue ribbons and the rest of it; but Canning had been jealous of him, and the Duke was jealous of him, and Palmerston never liked him. "Of course," he said, "these are things a man buries in his own breast. Of all the sorrows one encounters in life, the slights are those he last confesses; how I came to speak of them now I can't imagine—can you?" and he turned fully towards her, and saw that she blushed and cast down her eyes at the question.

"But, my lord," said she, evading the reply, "you give me the idea of one who would not readily succumb to an injustice. Am I right in my reading of you?"

"I trust and hope you are," said he, haughtily; "and it is my pride to think I have inspired that impression on so brief an acquaintance."

"It is my own temper too," she added. "You may convince; you cannot coerce me."

"I wish I might try the former," said he, in a tone of much meaning.

"We agree in so many things, my lord," said she, laughingly, "that there is little occasion for your persuasive power. There, do you see that smoke-wreath yonder? that's from the cottage where we're going."

"I wish I knew where we were going," said he, with a sigh of wonderful tenderness.

"To Roseneath, my lord. I told you the L'Estranges lived there."

"Yes; but it was not that I meant," added he, feelingly.

"And a pretty spot it is," continued she, purposely misunderstanding him; "so sheltered and secluded. By the way, what do you think of the curate's sister? She is very beautiful, isn't she?"

"Am I to say the truth?"

"Of course you are."

"I mean, may I speak as though we knew each other very well, and could talk in confidence together?"

"That is what I mean."

"And wish?" added he.

"Well, and wish, if you will supply the word."

"If I am to be frank, then, I don't admire her."

"Not think her beautiful?"

"Yes; there is some beauty—a good deal of beauty, if you like; but somehow it is not allied with that brightness that seems to accentuate beauty. She is tame and cold."

"I think men generally accuse her of coquetry."

"And there is coquetry, too; but of that character the French call *minauderie*, the weapon of a very small enchantress, I assure you."

"You are, then, for the captivations that give no quarter?" said she, smiling.

"It is a glory to be so vanquished," said he, heroically.

"My sister declared the other night, after Julia had sung that barcarole, that you were fatally smitten."

"And did you concur in the judgment?" asked he, tenderly.

"At first, perhaps I did, but when I came to know you a little better——"

"After our talk on the terrace?"

"And even before that. When Julia was singing for you—clearly for you, there was no disguise in the matter, and I whispered you, 'What courage you have!' you said, 'I have been so often under fire'—from that instant I knew you."

"Knew me—how far?"

"Enough to know that it was not to such captivations you would yield—that you had seen a great deal of that sort of thing."

"Oh, have I not!"

"Perhaps not always unscathed," said she, with a sly glance.

"I will scarcely go that far," replied he, with the air of a man on the best possible terms with himself. "They say he is the best rider who has had the most falls. At least, it may be said that he who has met no disasters has encountered few perils."

"Now, my lord, you can see the cottage completely. Is it not very pretty, and very picturesque, and is there not something very interesting—touching almost, in the thought of beauty and captivation—dwelling in this untravelled wilderness?"

He almost gave a little shudder, as his eye followed the line of the rugged mountain, till it blended with the bleak and shingly shore on which the waves were now washing in measured plash—the one sound in the universal silence around.

"Nothing but being desperately in love could make this solitude endurable," said he at last.

"Why not try that resource, my lord? I could almost promise you that the young lady who lives yonder is quite ready to be adored and worshipped, and all that sort of thing; and it would be such a boon on the frosty days, when the ground is too hard for hunting, to have this little bit of romance awaiting you."

"Coquetry and French cookery pall upon a man who has lived all his life abroad, and he actually longs for a little plain diet, in manners as well as meals."

"And then you have seen all the pretty acts of our very pretty neighbour so much better done?"

"Done by real artists," added he.

"Just so. Amateurship is always a poor thing. This is the way, my lord. If you will follow me, I will be your guide here; the path here is very slippery, and you must take care how you go."

"When I fall, it shall be at your feet," said he, with his hand on his heart.

As they gained the bottom of the little ravine down which the footpath lay, they found Julia, hoe in hand, at work in the garden before the door. Her dark woollen dress and her straw hat were only relieved in colour by a blue ribbon round her throat, but she was slightly flushed by exercise, and a little flurried, perhaps, by the surprise of seeing them, and her beauty, this time, certainly lacked nothing of that brilliancy which Lord Culduff had pronounced it deficient in.

"My brother will be so sorry to have missed you, my lord," said she, leading the way into the little drawing-room, where, amidst many signs of narrow fortune, there were two or three of those indications which vouch for cultivated tastes and pleasures.

"I had told Lord Culduff so much about your cottage, Julia," said Marion, "that he insisted on coming to see it, without even apprising you of his intention."

"It is just as well," said she artlessly. "A little more or less sun gives the only change in its appearance. Lord Culduff sees it now as it looks nearly every day."

"And very charming that is," said he, walking to the window and looking out; and then he asked the name of a headland, and how a small rocky island was called, and on which side lay the village of Portshandon, and at what

distance was the church, the replies to which seemed to afford him unmixed satisfaction, for as he resumed his seat he muttered several times to himself, "Very delightful indeed; very pleasing in every way."

"Lord Culduff was asking me, as he came along," said Marion, "whether I thought the solitude—I think he called it the savagery of this spot—was likely to be better borne by one native to such wildness, or by one so graced and gifted as yourself, and I protest he puzzled me."

"I used to think it very lonely when I came here first, but I believe I should be sorry to leave it now," said Julia calmly.

"There, my lord," said Marion, "you are to pick your answer out of that."

"As to those resources, which you are so flattering as to call my gifts and graces," said Julia, laughing, "such of them at least as lighten the solitude were all learned here. I never took to gardening before; I never fed poultry."

"Oh, Julia! have mercy on our illusions."

"You must tell me what they are, before I can spare them. The curate's sister has no claim to be thought an enchanted princess."

"It is all enchantment!" said Lord Culduff, who had only very imperfectly caught what she said.

"Then, I suppose, my lord," said Marion, haughtily, "I ought to rescue you before the spell is complete, as I came here in quality of guide." And she rose as she spoke. "The piano has not been opened to-day, Julia. I take it you seldom sing of a morning?"

"Very seldom indeed."

"So I told Lord Culduff; but I promised him his recompense in the evening. You are coming to us to-morrow, ain't you?"

"I fear not. I think George made our excuses. We are to have Mr. Longworth and a French friend of his here with us."

"You see, my lord, what a gay neighbourhood we have; here is a rival dinner-party," said Marion.

"There's no question of a dinner: they come to tea, I assure you," said Julia, laughing.

"No, my lord: it's useless, quite hopeless. I assure you she'll not sing for you of a morning." This speech was addressed to Lord Culduff, as he was turning over some music-books on the piano.

"Have I your permission to look at these?" said he to Julia, as he opened a book of drawings in water-colours.

"Of course, my lord. They are mere sketches taken in the neighbourhood here, and, as you will see, very hurriedly done."

"And have you such coast scenery as this?" asked he, in some astonishment, while he held up a rocky headland of several hundred feet, out of the caves at whose base a tumultuous sea was tumbling.

"I could show you finer and bolder bits than even that."

"Do you hear, my lord?" said Marion, in a low tone, only audible to himself. "The fair Julia is offering to be your guide. I'm afraid it is growing late. One does forget time at this cottage. It was only the last day I came here I got scolded for being late at dinner."

And now ensued one of those little bustling scenes of shawling and embracing with which young ladies separate. They talked together, and laughed, and kissed, and answered half-uttered sentences, and even seemed after parting to have something more to say; they were by turns sad, and playful, and saucy—all of these moods being duly accompanied by graceful action, and a chance display of a hand or foot, as it might be, and then they parted.

"Well, my lord," said Marion, as they ascended the steep path that led homewards, "what do you say now? Is Julia as cold and impassive as you pronounced her, or are you ungrateful enough to ignore fascinations all displayed and developed for your own especial captivation?"

"It was very pretty coquetry, all of it," said he, smiling. "Her eyelashes are even longer than I thought them."

"I saw that you remarked them, and she was gracious enough to remain looking at the drawing sufficiently long to allow you full time for the enjoyment."

The steep and rugged paths were quite as much as Lord Culduff could manage without talking, and he toiled along after her in silence, till they gained the beach.

"At last a bit of even ground," exclaimed he, with a sigh.

"You'll think nothing of the hill, my lord, when you've come it three or four times," said she, with a malicious twinkle of the eye.

"Which is precisely what I have no intention of doing."

"What! not cultivate the acquaintance so auspiciously opened?"

"Not at this price," said he, looking at his splashed boots.

"And that excursion, that ramble, or whatever be the name for it, you were to take together?"

"It is a bliss, I am afraid, I must deny myself."

"You are wrong, my lord; very wrong. My brothers at least assure me that Julia is charming en tête-à-tête. Indeed, Augustus says one does not know her at all till you have passed an hour or two in such confidential intimacy. He says 'she comes out'—whatever that may be—wonderfully."

"Oh, she comes out, does she?" said he, caressing his whiskers.

"That was his phrase for it. I take it to mean that she ventures to talk with a freedom more common on the Continent than in these islands. Is that coming out, my lord?"

"Well, I half suspect it is," said he, smiling faintly.

"And I suppose men like that?"

"I'm afraid, my dear Miss Bramleigh," said he, with a mock air of deploring—"I'm afraid that in these degenerate days men are very prone to like whatever gives them least trouble in everything, and if a woman will condescend to talk to us on our own topics, and treat them pretty much in our own way, we like it, simply because it diminishes the distance between us, and saves us that uphill clamber we are obliged to take when you insist upon our scrambling up to the high level you live in."

"It is somewhat of an ignoble confession you have made there," said she, haughtily.

"I know it—I feel it—I deplore it," said he, affectedly.

"If men will, out of mere indolence—no matter," said she, biting her lip. "I'll not say what I was going to say."

"Pray do. I beseech you finish what you have so well begun."

"Were I to do so, my lord," said she, gravely, "it might finish more than that. It might at least go some way towards finishing our acquaintanceship. I'm sorely afraid you'd not have forgiven me had you heard me out."

"I'd never have forgiven myself, if I were the cause of it."

For some time they walked along in silence, and now the great house came into view—its windows all glowing and glittering in the blaze of a setting sun, while a faint breeze lazily moved the heavy folds of the enormous flag that floated over the high tower.

"I call that a very princely place," said he, stopping to admire it.

"What a caprice to have built it in such a spot," said she. "The country people were not far wrong when they called it Bishop's Folly."

"They gave it that name, did they?"

"Yes, my lord. It is one of the ways in which humble folk reconcile themselves to lowly fortune; they ridicule their betters." And now she gave a little low laugh to herself, as if some unuttered notion had just amused her.

"What made you smile?" asked he.

"A very absurd fancy struck me."

"Let me hear it. Why not let me share in its oddity?"

"It might not amuse you as much as it amused me."

"I am the only one who can decide that point."

"Then I'm not so certain it might not annoy you."

"I can assure you on that head," said he, gallantly.

"Well, then, you shall hear it. The caprice of a great divine has, so to say, registered itself yonder, and will live, so long as stone and mortar endure, as Bishop's Folly; and I was thinking how strange it would be if another caprice just as unaccountable were to give a name to a less pretentious edifice, and a certain charming cottage be known to posterity as the Viscount's Folly. You're not angry with me, are you?"

"I'd be very angry indeed with you, with myself, and with the whole world, if I thought such a casualty a possibility."

"I assure you, when I said it I didn't believe it, my lord," said she, looking at him with much graciousness; "and, indeed, I would never have uttered the impertinence if you had not forced me. There, there goes the first bell; we shall have short time to dress." And, with a very meaning smile and a familiar gesture of her hand, she tripped up the steps and disappeared.

"I think I'm all right in that quarter," was his lordship's reflection as he mounted the stairs to his room.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EVENING BELOW AND ABOVE STAIRS.

It was not very willingly that Mr. Cutbill left the drawing-room, where he had been performing a violoncello accompaniment to one of the young ladies in the execution of something very Mendelssohnian and profoundly puzzling to the uninitiated in harmonics. After the peerage he loved counterpoint; and it was really hard to tear himself away from passages of almost piercing shrillness, or those still more suggestive moanings of a double bass, to talk stock and share-list with Colonel Bramleigh in the library. Resisting all the assurances that "papa wouldn't mind it; that any other time would do quite as well," and such like, he went up to his room for his books and papers, and then repaired to his rendezvous.

"I'm sorry to take you away from the drawing-room, Mr. Cutbill," said Bramleigh, as he entered, "but I am half expecting a summons to town, and could not exactly be sure of an opportunity to talk over this matter on which Lord Culduff is very urgent to have my opinion."

"It is not easy, I confess, to tear oneself away from such society. Your daughters are charming musicians, Colonel. Miss Bramleigh's style is as brilliant as Meyer's; and Miss Eleanor has a delicacy of touch I have never heard surpassed."

"This is very flattering, coming from so consummate a judge as yourself."

"All the teaching in the world will not impart that sensitive organization which sends some tones into the heart like the drip, drip of water on a heated brow. Oh, dear! music is too much for me; it totally subverts all my sentiments. I'm not fit for business after it, Colonel Bramleigh, that's the fact."

"Take a glass of that 'Bra Mouton.' You will find it good. It has been eight-and-thirty years in my cellar, and I never think of bringing it out except for a connoisseur in wine."

"Nectar, positively nectar," said he, smacking his lips. "You are quite right not to give this to the public. They would drink it like a mere full-bodied Bordeaux. That velvety softness—that subdued strength, faintly recalling Burgundy, and that delicious bouquet, would all be clean thrown away on most people. I declare, I believe a refined palate is just as rare as a correct ear; don't you think so?"

"I'm glad you like the wine. Don't spare it. The cellar is not far off. Now then, let us see. These papers contain Mr. Stebbing's report. I have only glanced my eye over it, but it seems like every other report. They have, I think, a stereotyped formula for these things. They all set out with their bit of geological learning; but you know, Mr. Cutbill, far better than I can tell you, you know sandstone doesn't always mean coal?"

"If it doesn't, it ought to," said Cutbill, with a laugh, for the wine had made him jolly, and familiar besides.

"There are many things in this world which ought to be, but which, unhappily, are not," said Bramleigh, in a tone evidently meant to be half-reproachful. "And as I have already observed to you, mere geological formation is not sufficient. We want the mineral, sir; we want the fact."

"There you have it; there it is for you," said Cutbill, pointing to a somewhat bulky parcel in brown paper in the centre of the table.

"This is not real coal, Mr. Cutbill," said Bramleigh, as he tore open the covering, and exposed a black mis-shapen lump. "You would not call this real coal?"

"I'd not call it Swansea nor Cardiff, Colonel, any more than I'd say the claret we had after dinner to-day was 'Mouton;' but still I'd call each of them very good in their way."

"I return you my thanks, sir, in the name of my wine-merchant. But to come to the coal question—what could you do with this?"

"What could I do with it? Scores of things—if I had only enough of it. Burn it in grates—cook with it—smelt metals with it—burn lime with it—drive engines, not locomotives, but stationaries, with it. I tell you what, Colonel Bramleigh," said he, with the air of a man who was asserting what he would not suffer to be gainsayed. "It's coal quite enough to start a company on; coal within the meaning of the act, as the lawyers would say."

"You appear to have rather loose notions of joint-stock enterprises, Mr. Cutbill," said Bramleigh, haughtily.

"I must say, Colonel, they do not invariably inspire me with sentiments of absolute veneration."

"I hope, however, you feel, sir, that in any enterprise—in any undertaking—where my name is to stand forth, either as promoter or abettor, that the world is to see in such guarantee the assurance of solvency and stability."

"That is precisely what made me think of you; precisely what led me to say to Culduff, 'Bramleigh is the man to carry the scheme out.'"

Now the familiarity that spoke of Culduff thus unceremoniously in great part reconciled Bramleigh to hear his own name treated in like fashion, all the more that it was in a quotation; but still he winced under the cool impertinence of the man, and grieved to think how far his own priceless wine had contributed towards it. The Colonel therefore merely bowed his acknowledgment and was silent.

"I'll be frank with you," said Cutbill, emptying the last of the decanter into his glass as he spoke. "I'll be frank with you. We've got coal; whether it be much or little, there it is. As to quality, as I said before, it isn't Cardiff. It won't set the Thames on fire, any more than the noble lord that owns it; but coal it is, and it will burn as coal—and yield gas as coal—and make coke as coal, and who wants more? As to working it himself, Culduff might just as soon pretend he'd pay the National Debt. He is over head and ears already; he has been in bondage with the children of Israel this many a day, and if he wasn't a peer he could not show; but that's neither here nor there. To set the concern a-going we must either have a loan or a company. I'm for a company."

"You are for a company," reiterated Bramleigh, slowly as he fixed his eyes calmly but steadily on him.

"Yes, I'm for a company. With a company, Bramleigh," said he, as he tossed off the last glass of wine, "there's always more of P. E."

"Of what?"

"Of P. E.—Preliminary expenses! There's a commission to inquire into this, and a deputation to investigate that. No men on earth dine like deputations. I never knew what dining was till I was named on a deputation. It was on sewerage. And didn't the champagne flow! There was a viaduct to be constructed to lead into the Thames, and I

never think of that viaduct without the taste of turtle in my mouth, and a genial feeling of milk-punch all over me. The assurance offices say that there was scarcely such a thing known as a gout premium in the City till the joint-stock companies came in; now they have them every day."

"*Revenons à nos moutons*, as the French say, Mr. Cutbill," said Bramleigh, gravely.

"If it's a pun you mean, and that we're to have another bottle of the same, I second the motion."

Bramleigh gave a sickly smile as he rang the bell, but neither the jest nor the jester much pleased him.

"Bring another bottle of 'Mouton,' Drayton, and fresh glasses," said he, as the butler appeared.

"I'll keep mine, it is warm and mellow," said Cutbill. "The only fault with that last bottle was the slight chill on it."

"You have been frank with me, Mr. Cutbill," said Bramleigh, as soon as the servant withdrew, "and I will be no less so with you. I have retired from the world of business—I have quitted the active sphere where I have passed some thirty odd years, and have surrendered ambition, either of money-making, or place, or rank, and come over here with one single desire, one single wish—I want to see what's to be done for Ireland."

Cutbill lifted his glass to his lips, but scarcely in time to hide the smile of incredulous drollery which curled them, and which the other's quick glance detected.

"There is nothing to sneer at, sir, in what I said, and I will repeat my words. I want to see what's to be done for Ireland."

"It's very laudable in you, there can be no doubt," said Cutbill, gravely.

"I am well aware of the peril incurred by addressing to men like yourself, Mr. Cutbill, any opinions—any sentiments —which savour of disinterestedness, or—or——"

"Poetry," suggested Cutbill.

"No, sir; patriotism was the word I sought for. And it is not by any means necessary that a man should be an Irishman to care for Ireland. I think, sir, there is nothing in that sentiment at least which will move your ridicule."

"Quite the reverse. I have drunk 'Prosperity to Ireland' at public dinners for twenty years; and in very good liquor too, occasionally."

"I am happy to address a gentleman so graciously disposed

to listen to me," said Bramleigh, whose face was now crimson with anger. "There is only one thing more to be wished for —that he would join some amount of trustfulness to his politeness; with that he would be perfect."

"Here goes, then, for perfection," cried Cutbill, gaily. "I'm ready from this time to believe anything you tell me."

"Sir, I will not draw largely on the fund you so generously place at my disposal. I will simply ask you to believe me a man of honour."

"Only that? No more than that?"

"No more, I pledge you my word."

"My dear Bramleigh, your return for the income-tax is enough to prove that. Nothing short of high integrity ever possessed as good a fortune as yours."

"You are speaking of my fortune, Mr. Cutbill, not of my character."

"Ain't they the same? Ain't they one and the same? Show me your dividends, and I will show you your disposition—that's as true as the Bible."

"I will not follow you into this nice inquiry. I will simply return to where I started from, and repeat, I want to do something for Ireland."

"Do it, in God's name; and I hope you'll like it when it's done. I have known some half-dozen men in my time who had the same sort of ambition. One of them tried a cotton-mill on the Liffey, and they burned him down. Another went in for patent fuel, and they shot his steward. A third tried Galway marble, and they shot himself. But after all there's more honour where there's more danger. What, may I ask, is your little game for Ireland?"

"I begin to suspect that a better time for business, Mr. Cutbill, might be an hour after breakfast. Shall we adjourn till to-morrow morning?"

"I am completely at your orders. For my own part, I never felt clearer in my life than I do this minute. I'm ready to go into coal with you: from the time of sinking the shaft to riddling the slack, my little calculations are all made. I could address a board of managing directors here as I sit; and say, what for dividend, what for repairs, what for a reserved fund, and what for the small robberies."

The unparalleled coolness of the man had now pushed Bramleigh's patience to its last limit; but a latent fear of what such a fellow might be in his enmity, restrained him and compelled him to be cautious.

"What sum do you think the project will require, Mr. Cutbill?"

"I think about eighty thousand; but I'd say one hundred and fifty—it's always more respectable. Small investments are seldom liked; and then the margin—the margin is broader."

"Yes, certainly; the margin is much broader."

"Fifty-pound shares, with a call of five every three months, will start us. The chief thing is to begin with a large hand." Here he made a wide sweep of his arm.

"For coal like that yonder," said Bramleigh, pointing to the specimen, "you'd not get ten shillings the ton."

"Fifteen—fifteen. I'd make it the test of a man's patriotism to use it. I'd get the Viceroy to burn it, and the Chief Secretary, and the Archbishop, and Father Cullen. I'd heat St. Patrick's with it, and the national schools. There could be no disguise about it; like the native whisky, it would be known by the smell of the smoke."

"You have drawn up some sort of prospectus?"

"Some sort of prospectus! I think I have. There's a document there on the table might go before the House of Commons this minute; and the short and the long of it is, Bramleigh"—here he crossed his arms on the table, and dropped his voice to a tone of great confidence—"it is a good thing—a right good thing. There's coal there, of one kind or other, for five-and-twenty years, perhaps more. The real, I may say, the only difficulty of the whole scheme will be to keep old Culduff from running off with all the profits. As soon as the money comes rolling in, he'll set off shelling it out; he's just as wasteful as he was thirty years ago."

"That will be impossible when a company is once regularly formed."

"I know that. I know that; but men of his stamp say, 'We know nothing about trade. We haven't been bred up to office-stools and big ledgers; and when we want money, we get it how we can.'"

"We can't prevent him selling out or mortgaging his shares. You mean, in short, that he should not be on the direction?" added he.

"That's it; that's exactly it," said Cutbill, joyously.

"Will he like that? Will he submit to it?"

"He'll like whatever promises to put him most speedily into funds; he'll submit to whatever threatens to stop the supplies. Don't you know these men better than I do, who

pass lives of absenteeism from their country; how little they care how or whence money comes, provided they get it? They neither know, nor want to know, about good or bad seasons, whether harvests are fine, or trade profitable; their one question is, 'Can you answer my draft at thirty-one days?'"

"Ah, yes; there is too much, far too much, of what you say in the world," said Bramleigh, sighing.

"These are not the men who want to do something for Ireland," said the other, quizzically.

"Sir, it may save us both some time and temper if I tell you I have never been 'chaffed.'"

"That sounds to me like a man saying, I have never been out in the rain; but as it is so, there's no more to be said."

"Nothing, sir. Positively nothing on that head."

"Nor indeed on any other. Men in my line of life couldn't get on without it. Chaff lubricates business just the way grease oils machinery. There would be too much friction in life without chaff, Bramleigh."

"I look upon it as directly the opposite. I regard it as I would a pebble getting amongst the wheels, and causing jar and disturbance, sir."

"Well, then," said Cutbill, emptying the last drop into his glass, "I take it I need not go over all the details you will find in those papers. There are plans, and specifications, and estimates, and computations, showing what we mean to do, and how; and as I really could add nothing to the report, I suppose I may wish you a good night."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Cutbill, if my inability to be jocular should deprive me of the pleasure of your society, but there are still many points on which I desire to be informed."

"It's all there. If you were to bray me in a mortar you couldn't get more out of me than you'll find in those papers; and whether it's the heat of the room, or the wine, or the subject, but I am awfully sleepy," and he backed this assurance with a hearty yawn.

"Well, sir, I must submit to your dictation. I will try and master these details before I go to bed, and will take some favourable moment to-morrow to talk them over."

"That's said like a sensible man," said Cutbill, clapping him familiarly on the shoulder, and steadying himself the while; for as he stood up to go, he found that the wine had been stronger than he suspected. "When we see a little

more of each other," said he, in the oracular tone of a man who had drunk too much; "when we see a little more of each other, we'll get on famously. You know the world, and I know the world. You have had your dealings with men, and I have had my dealings with men, and we know what's what. Ain't I right, Bramleigh?"

"I have no doubt there is much truth in what you say."

"Truth, truth, it's true as gospel! There's only one thing, however, to be settled between us. Each must make his little concession with reci-procity—reci-procity, ain't it?"

"Quite so; but I don't see your meaning."

"Here it is then, Bramleigh; here's what I mean. If we're to march together we must start fair. No man is to have more baggage than his neighbour. If I'm to give up chaff, do you see, you must give up humbug? If I'm not to have my bit of fun, old boy, you're not to come over me about doing something for Ireland, that's all," and with this he lounged out, banging the door after him as he went.

Mr. Cutbill, as he went to his room, had a certain vague suspicion that he had drunk more wine than was strictly necessary, and that the liquor was not impossibly stronger than he had suspected. He felt, too, in the same vague way, that there had been a passage of arms between his host and himself, but as to what it was about, and who was the victor, he had not the shadow of a conception.

Neither did his ordinary remedy of pouring the contents of his water-jug over his head aid him on this occasion.

"I'm not a bit sleepy; nonsense!" muttered he, "so I'll go and see what they are doing in the smoking-room."

Here he found the three young men of the house in that semi-thoughtful dreariness which is supposed to be the captivation of tobacco; as if the mass of young Englishmen needed anything to deepen the habitual gloom of their natures, or thicken the sluggish apathy that follows them into all inactivity.

"How jolly," cried Cutbill, as he entered. "I'll be shot if believed as I came up the stairs that there was any one here. You haven't even got brandy and seltzer."

"If you touch that bell, they'll bring it," said Augustus, languidly.

"Some Moselle for *me*," said Temple, as the servant entered.

"I'm glad you've come, Cutty," cried Jack; "as old Kemp used to say, anything is better than a dead calm, even a mutiny."

"What an infernal old hurdy-gurdy. Why haven't you a decent piano here, if you have one at all?" said Cutbill, as he ran his hands over the keys of a discordant old instrument that actually shook on its legs as he struck the chords.

"I suspect it was mere accident brought it here," said Augustus. "It was invalided out of the girls' schoolroom, and sent up here to be got rid of."

"Sing us something, Cutty," said Jack; "it will be a real boon at this moment."

"I'll sing like a grove of nightingales for you, when I have wet my lips; but I am parched in the mouth, like a Cape parrot. I've had two hours of your governor below stairs. Very dry work, I promise you."

"Did he offer you nothing to drink?" asked Jack.

"Yes, we had two bottles of very tidy claret. He called it 'Mouton.'"

"By Jove!" said Augustus, "you must have been high in the governor's favour to be treated to his 'Bra Mouton.'"

"We had a round with the gloves, nevertheless," said Cutbill, "and exchanged some ugly blows. I don't exactly know about what or how it began, or even how it ended; but I know there was a black eye somewhere. He's passionate, rather."

"He has the spirit that should animate every gentleman," said Temple.

"That's exactly what *I* have. I'll stand anything, I don't care what, if it be fun. Say it's a 'joke,' and you'll never see me show bad temper; but if any fellow tries it on with me because he fancies himself a swell, or has a handle to his name, he'll soon discover his mistake. Old Culduff began that way. You'd laugh if you saw how he floundered out of the swamp afterwards."

"Tell us about it, Cutty," said Jack, encouragingly.

"I beg to say I should prefer not hearing anything which might, even by inference, reflect on a person holding Lord Culduff's position in my profession," said Temple haughtily.

"Is that the quarter the wind's in?" asked Cutbill, with a not very sober expression in his face.

"Sing us a song, Cutty. It will be better than all this sparring," said Jack.

"What shall it be?" said Cutbill, seating himself at the

piano, and running over the keys with no small skill. "Shall I describe my journey to Ireland?"

"By all means let's hear it," said Augustus.

"I forget how it goes. Indeed, some verses I was making on the curate's sister have driven the others out of my head."

Jack drew nigh, and leaning over his shoulder, whispered something in his ear.

"What!" cried Cutbill, starting up; "he says he'll pitch me neck and crop out of the window."

"Not unless you deserve it—add that," said Jack, sternly.

"I must have an apology for those words, sir. I shall insist on your recalling them, and expressing your sincere regret for having ever used them."

"So you shall, Cutty. I completely forgot that this tower was ninety feet high; but I'll pitch you downstairs, which will do as well."

There was a terrible gleam of earnestness in Jack's eye as he spoke this laughingly, which appalled Cutbill far more than any bluster, and he stammered out, "Let us have no practical jokes; they're bad taste. You'd be a great fool, admiral"—this was a familiarity he occasionally used with Jack—"you'd be a great fool to quarrel with *me*. I can do more with the fellows at Somerset House than most men going; and when the day comes that they'll give you a command, and you'll want twelve or fifteen hundred to set you afloat, Tom Cutbill is not the worst man to know in the City. Not to say, that if things go right down here, I could help you to something very snug in our mine. Won't we come out strong then, eh?"

Here he rattled over the keys once more; and after humming to himself for a second or two, burst out with a rattling, merry air, to which he sung,—

"With crests on our harness and breechin,
In a carriage and four we shall roll,
With a splendid French cook in the kitchen,
If we only succeed to find coal,
Coal!
If we only are sure to find coal."

"A barcarole, I declare," said Lord Culduff, entering. "It was a good inspiration led me up here."

A jolly roar of laughter at his mistake welcomed him; and Cutty, with an aside, cried out, "He's deaf as a post," and continued,—

"If we marry, we'll marry a beauty,
If single we'll try and control
Our tastes within limits of duty,
And make ourselves jolly with coal,
Coal!
And make ourselves jolly with coal.

"They may talk of the mines of Golcondar,
Or the shafts of Puebla del Sol;
But to fill a man's pocket, I wonder
If there's anything equal to coal,
Coal!
If there's anything equal to coal.

"At Naples we'll live on the Chiaja,
With our schooner-yacht close to the Mole,
And make daily picknickings to Baja,
If we only come down upon coal,
Coal!
If we only come down upon coal."

"One of the fishermen's songs," said Lord Culduff, as he beat time on the table. "I've passed many a night on the Bay of Naples listening to them."

And a wild tumultuous laugh now convulsed the company, and Cutbill, himself overwhelmed by the absurdity, rushed to the door, and made his escape without waiting for more.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE COTTAGE.

Julia L'Estrange was busily engaged in arranging some flowers in certain vases in her little drawing-room, and, with a taste all her own, draping a small hanging lamp with creepers, when Jack Bramleigh appeared at the open window, and leaning on the sill, cried out, "Good morning."

"I came over to scold you, Julia," said he. "It was very cruel of you to desert us last evening, and we had a most dreary time of it in consequence."

"Come round and hold this chair for me, and don't talk nonsense."

"And what are all these fine preparations for? You are decking out your room as if for a village fête," said he, not moving from his place nor heeding her request.

"I fancy that young Frenchman who was here last night," said she, saucily, "would have responded to my invitation if I had asked him to hold the chair I was standing on."

"I've no doubt of it," said he, gravely. "Frenchmen are vastly more gallant than we are."

"Do you know, Jack," said she again, "he is most amusing?"

"Very probably."

"And has such a perfect accent; that sort of purring French one only hears from a Parisian."

"I am charmed to hear it."

"It charmed me to hear it, I assure you. One does so long for the sounds that recall bright scenes and pleasant people: one has such a zest for the most commonplace things that bring back the memory of very happy days."

"What a lucky Frenchman to do all this!"

"What a lucky Irish girl to have met with him!" said she, gaily.

"And how did you come to know him, may I ask?"

"George had been several times over to inquire after him, and out of gratitude Count Pracontal,—I am not sure that he is count though, but it is of no moment,—made it a point

to come here the first day he was able to drive out. Mr. Longworth drove him over in his pony carriage, and George was so pleased with them both that he asked them to tea last evening, and they dine here to-day?"

"Hence these decorations?"

"Precisely."

"What a brilliant neighbourhood we have! And there are people will tell you that this is all barbarism here."

"Come over this evening, Jack, and hear M. Pracontal sing—he has a delicious tenor voice—and you'll never believe in that story of barbarism again. We had quite a little *salon* last night."

"I must take your word for his attractive qualities," said Jack, as his brow contracted and his face grew darker. "I thought your brother rather stood aloof from Mr. Longworth. I was scarcely prepared to hear of his inviting him here."

"So he did; but he found him so different from what he expected—so quiet, so well-bred, that George, who always is in a hurry to make an *amende* when he thinks he has wronged any one, actually rushed into acquaintance with him at once."

"And his sister Julia," asked Jack, with a look of impertinent irony, "was she, too, as impulsive in her friendship?"

"I think pretty much the same."

"It must have been a charming party."

"I flatter myself it was. They stayed till midnight; and M. Pracontal declared he'd break his other leg to-morrow if it would ensure him another such evening in his convalescence."

"Fulsome rascal! I protest it lowers my opinion of women altogether when I think these are the fellows that always meet their favour."

"Women would be very ungrateful if they did not like the people who try to please them. Now, certainly, as a rule, Jack, you will admit foreigners are somewhat more eager about this than you gentlemen of England."

"I have about as much of this as I am likely to bear well from my distinguished stepmother," said he, roughly, "so don't push my patience further."

"What do you say to our little *salon* now?" said she. "Have you ever seen ferns and variegated ivy disposed more tastefully?"

"I wish—I wish"—stammered he out, and then seemed unable to go on.

"And what do you wish?"

"I suppose I must not say it. You might feel offended besides."

"Not a bit, Jack. I am sure it never could be your intention to offend me, and a mere blunder could not do so."

"Well, I'll go round and tell you what it is I wish," and with this he entered the house and passed on into the drawing-room, and taking his place at one side of the fire, while she stood at the other, said seriously, "I was wishing, Julia, that you were less of a coquette."

"You don't mean that?" said she, roguishly, dropping her long eyelashes, as she looked down immediately after.

"I mean it seriously, Julia. It is your one fault; but it is an immense one."

"My dear Jack," said she, very gravely, "you men are such churls that you are never grateful for any attempts to please you except they be limited strictly to yourselves. You would never have dared to call any little devices, by which I sought to amuse or interest you, coquetry, so long as they were only employed on your own behalf. My real offence is that I thought the world consisted of you and some others."

"I am not your match in these sort of subtle discussions," said he, bluntly, "but I know what I say is fact."

"That I'm a coquette?" said she, with so much feigned horror that Jack could scarcely keep down the temptation to laugh.

"Just so; for the mere pleasure of displaying some grace or some attraction, you'd half kill a fellow with jealousy, or drive him clean mad with uncertainty. You insist on admiration—or what you call 'homage,' which I trust is only a French name for it—and what's the end of it all? You get plenty of this same homage; but—but—never mind. I suppose I'm a fool to talk this way. You're laughing at me besides, all this while. I see it—I see it in your eyes."

"I wasn't laughing, Jack, I assure you. I was simply thinking that this discovery—I mean of my coquetry—wasn't yours at all. Come, be frank and own it. Who told you I was a coquette, Jack?"

"You regard me as too dull-witted to have found it out, do you?"

"No, Jack. Too honest-hearted—too unsuspecting, too generous, to put an ill construction where a better one would do as well.

"If you mean that there are others who agree with me, you're quite right."

"And who may they be?" asked she, with a quiet smile. "Come, I have a right to know."

"I don't see the right."

"Certainly I have. It would be very ungenerous and very unjust to let me continue to exercise all those pleasing devices you have just stigmatized for the delectation of people who condemn them."

"Oh, you couldn't help that. You'd do it just to amuse yourself, as I'm sure was the case yesterday, when you put forth all your captivations for that stupid old Viscount."

"Did I?"

"Did you? You have the face to ask it?"

"I have, Jack. I have courage for even more, for I will ask you, was it not Marion said this? Was it not Marion who was so severe on all my little gracefulnesses? Well, you need not answer if you don't like. I'll not press my question; but own, it is not fair for Marion, with every advantage, her beauty and her surroundings——"

"Her what?"

"Well I would not use a French word; but I meant to say, those accessories which are represented by dress. and 'toilette'—not mean things in female estimation. With all these, why not have a little mercy for the poor curate's sister, reduced to enter the lists with very uncouth weapons?"

"You won't deny that Ellen loves you?" said he, suddenly.

"I'd be sorry, very sorry, to doubt it; but she never said I was a coquette?"

"I'm sure she knows you are," said he, doggedly.

"Oh, Jack, I hope this is not the way you try people on court-martial?"

"It's the fairest way ever a fellow was tried; and if one doesn't feel him guilty he'd never condemn him."

"I'd rather people would feel less, and think a little more, if I was to be 'the accused,'" said she, half pettishly.

"You got that, Master Jack; that round shot was for *you*," said he, not without some irritation in his tone.

"Well," said she, good-humouredly, "I believe we are firing into each other this morning, and I declare I cannot see for what."

"I'll tell you, Julia. You grew very cross with me, because I accused you of being a coquette, a charge you'd have thought pretty lightly of if you hadn't known it was deserved."

"Might there not have been another reason for the crossness, supposing it to have existed?" said she, quietly.

"I cannot imagine one; at least, I can't imagine what reason you point at."

"Simply this," said she, half carelessly, "that it could have been no part of your duty to have told me so."

"You mean that it was a great liberty on my part—an unwarrantable liberty?"

"Something like it."

"That the terms which existed between us"—and now he spoke with a tremulous voice, and a look of much agitation—"could not have warranted my daring to point out a fault, even in your manner; for I am sure, after all, your nature had nothing do do with it?"

She nodded, and was silent.

"That's pretty plain, anyhow," said he, moving towards the table, where he had placed his hat. "It's a sharp lesson to give a fellow though, all the more when he was unprepared for it."

"You forget that the first sharp lesson came from *you*."

"All true; there's no denying it." He took up his hat as she spoke, and moved, half awkwardly, towards the window. "I had a message for you from the girls, if I could only remember it. Do you happen to guess what it was about?"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly as a negative, and was silent.

"I'll be shot if I can think what it was," muttered he; "the chances are, however, it was to ask you to do something or other, and as, in your present temper, that would be hopeless, it matters little that I have forgotten it."

She made no answer to this speech, but quietly occupied herself arranging a braid of her hair that had just fallen down.

"Miss L'Estrange!" said he, in a haughty and somewhat bold tone.

"Mr. Bramleigh," replied she, turning and facing him with perfect gravity, though her tremulous lip and sparkling eye showed what the effort to seem serious cost her.

"If you will condescend to be real, to be natural, for about

a minute and a half, it may save us, or at least one of us, a world of trouble and unhappiness."

"It's not a very courteous supposition of yours that implies I am unreal or unnatural," said she, calmly; "but no matter, go on; say what you desire to say, and you shall find me pretty attentive."

"What I want to say is this, then," said he, approaching where she stood, and leaning one arm on the chimney close to where her own arm was resting; "I wanted to tell—no, I wanted to ask you, if the old relations between us are to be considered as bygone—if I am to go away from this to-day believing that all I have ever said to you, all that you heard—for you *did* hear me, Julia——"

"Julia!" repeated she, in mock amazement. "What liberty is this, sir?" and she almost laughed out as she spoke.

"I knew well how it would be," said he, angrily. "There is a heartless levity in your nature that nothing represses. I asked you to be serious for one brief instant."

"And you shall find that I can," said she, quickly. "If I have not been more so hitherto, it has been in mercy to yourself."

"In mercy to me? To me! What do you mean?"

"Simply this. You came here to give me a lesson this morning. But it was at your sister's suggestion. It was her criticism that prompted you to the task. I read it all. I saw how ill prepared you were. You have mistaken some things, forgotten others; and, in fact, you showed me that you were far more anxious I should exculpate myself than that you yourself should be the victor. It was for this reason that I was really annoyed—seriously annoyed, at what you said to me; and I called in what you are so polite as to style my 'levity' to help me through my difficulty. Now, however, you have made me serious enough; and it is in this mood I say, Don't charge yourself another time with such a mission. Reprove whatever you like, but let it come from yourself. Don't think light-heartedness—I'll not say levity—bad in morals, because it may be bad in taste. There's a lesson for you, sir." And she held out her hand as if in reconciliation.

"But you haven't answered my question, Julia," said he, tremulously.

"And what was your question?"

"I asked you if the past—if all that had taken place between us—was to be now forgotten?"

"I declare here is George," said she, bounding towards the window and opening it. "What a splendid fish, George! Did you take it yourself?"

"Yes, and he cost me the top joint of my rod; and I'd have lost him after all if Lafferty had not waded out and landed him. "I'm between two minds, Julia, whether I'll send him up to the Bramleighs'."

She put her finger to her lip to impose caution, and said, "The admiral"—the nickname by which Jack was known—"is here."

"All right," replied L'Estrange. "We'll try and keep him for dinner, and eat the fish at home." He entered as he spoke. "Where's Jack. Didn't you say he was here?"

"So he was when I spoke. He must have slipped away without my seeing it. He is really gone."

"I hear he is gazetted; appointed to some ship on a foreign station. Did he tell you of it?"

"Not a word. Indeed, he had little time, for we did nothing but squabble since he came in."

"It was Harding told me. He said that Jack did not seem overjoyed at his good luck; and declared that he was not quite sure he would accept it."

"Indeed," said she, thoughtfully.

"That's not the only news. Colonel Bramleigh was summoned to town by a telegram this morning, but what about I didn't hear. If Harding knew—and I'm not sure that he did—he was too discreet to tell. But I am not at the end of my tidings. It seems they have discovered coal on Lord Culduff's estate, and a great share company is going to be formed, and untold wealth to be distributed amongst the subscribers?"

"I wonder why Jack did not tell me he was going away?" said she.

"Perhaps he does not intend to go; perhaps the Colonel has gone up to try and get something better for him; perhaps——"

"Any perhaps will do, George," said she, like one willing to change the theme. "What do you say to my decorations? Have you no compliments to make me on my exquisite taste?"

"Harding certainly thinks well of it," said he, not heeding her question.

"Thinks well of what, George?"

"He's a shrewd fellow," continued he; "and if he deems

the investment good enough to venture his own money in, I suspect, Ju, we might risk ours."

"I wish you would tell me what you are talking about; for all this is a perfect riddle to me."

"It's about vesting your two thousand pounds, Julia, which now return about seventy pounds a year, in the coal speculation. That's what I am thinking of. Harding says, that taking a very low estimate of the success, there ought to be a profit on the shares of fifteen per cent. In fact, he said he wouldn't go into it himself for less."

"Why, George, why did he say this? Is there anything wrong or immoral about coal?"

"Try and be serious for one moment, Ju," said he, with a slight touch of irritation in his voice. "What Harding evidently meant was, that a speculative interprise was not to be deemed good if it yielded less. These shrewd men, I believe, never lay out their money without large profit."

"And, my dear George, why come and consult me about these things? Can you imagine more hopeless ignorance than mine must be on all such questions?"

"You can understand that a sum of money yielding three hundred a year is more profitably employed than when it only returned seventy."

"Yes; I think my intelligence can rise to that height."

"And you can estimate, also, what increase of comfort we should have if our present income were to be more than doubled—which it would be in this way?"

"I'd deem it positive affluence, George."

"That's all I want you to comprehend. The next question is to get Vickars to consent; he is the surviving trustee, and you'll have to write to him, Ju. It will come better from you than me, and say—what you can say with a safe conscience—that we are miserably poor, and that, though we pinch and save in every way we can, there's no reaching the end of the year without a deficit in the budget."

"I used that unlucky phrase once before, George, and he replied, 'Why don't you cut down the estimates?'"

"I know he did. The old curmudgeon meant I should sell Nora, and he has a son, a gentleman commoner at Cambridge, that spends more in wine-parties than our whole income."

"But it's his own, George. It is not our money he is wasting."

"Of course it is not; but does that exempt him from all

comment? Not that it matters to us, however," added he, in a lighter tone. "Sit down, and try what you can do with the old fellow. You used to be a great pet of his once on a time."

"Yes, he went so far as to say that if I had even twenty thousand pounds, he didn't know a girl he'd rather have for a daughter-in-law."

"He didn't tell you that, Ju?" said L'Estrange, growing almost purple with shame and rage together.

"I pledge you my word he said it."

"And what did you say? What did you do?"

"I wiped my eyes with my handkerchief, and told him it was for the first time in my life I felt the misery of being poor."

"And I wager that you burst out laughing."

"I did, George. I laughed till my sides ached. I laughed till he rushed out of the room in a fit of passion, and I declare, I don't think he ever spoke ten words to me after."

"This gives me scant hope of your chance of success with him."

"I don't know, George. All this happened ten months ago, when he came down here for the snipe-shooting. He may have forgiven, or, better still, forgotten it. In any case, tell me exactly what I'm to write, and I'll see what I can do with him."

"You're to say that your brother has just heard from a person, in whom he places the most perfect confidence, say Harding in short—Colonel Bramleigh's agent—that an enterprise which will shortly be opened here offers an admirable opportunity of investment, and that as your small fortune in Consols——"

"In what?"

"No matter. Say that as your two thousand pounds—which now yield an interest of seventy, could secure you an income fully four times that sum, you hope he will give his consent to withdraw the money from the Funds, and employ it in this speculation. I'd not say speculation, I'd call it mine at once—coal-mine."

"But if I own this money, why must I ask Mr. Vickars' leave to make use of it as I please?"

"He is your trustee, and the law gives him this power, Ju, till you are nineteen, which you will not be till May next."

"He'll scarcely be disagreeable, when his opposition must end in five months."

"That's what I think too, but before that five months run over the share list may be filled, and these debentures be probably double the present price."

"I'm not sure I understand your reasoning, but I'll go and write my letter, and you shall see if I have said all that you wished."

CHAPTER XIV.

OFFICIAL CONFIDENCES.

Lord Culduff accompanied Colonel Bramleigh to town. He wanted a renewal of his leave, and deemed it better to see the head of the department in person than to address a formal demand to the office. Colonel Bramleigh, too, thought that his lordship's presence might be useful when the day of action had arrived respecting the share company—a lord in the City having as palpable a value as the most favourable news that ever sent up the Funds.

When they reached London they separated, Bramleigh taking up his quarters in the Burlington, while Lord Culduff —on pretence of running down to some noble duke's villa near Richmond—snugly installed himself in a very modest lodging off St. James's Street, where a former valet acted as his cook and landlord, and on days of dining out assisted at the wonderful toilet, whose success was alike the marvel and the envy of Culduff's contemporaries.

Though a man of several clubs, his lordship's favourite haunt was a small unimposing-looking house close to St. James's Square, called the "Plenipo." Its members were all diplomatists, nothing below the head of a mission being eligible for ballot. A Masonic mystery pervaded all the doings of that austere temple, whose dinners were reported to be exquisite, and whose cellar had such a fame that "Plenipo Lafitte" had a European reputation.

Now, veteran asylums have many things recommendatory about them, but from Greenwich and the Invalides downwards there is one especial vice that clings to them—they are haunts of everlasting complaint. The men who frequent

them all belong to the past, their sympathies, their associations, their triumphs and successes, all pertain to the bygone. Harping eternally over the frivolity, the emptiness, and sometimes the vulgarity of the present, they urge each other on to most exaggerated notions of the time when they were young, and a deprecatory estimate of the world then around them.

It is not alone that the days of good dinners and good conversation have passed away, but even good manners have gone, and more strangely too, good looks. "I protest you don't see such women now"—one of these bewigged and rouged old debauchees would say, as he gazed at the slow procession moving on to a drawing-room, and his compeers would concur with him, and wonderingly declare that the thing was inexplicable.

In the sombre-looking breakfast-room of this austere temple, Lord Culduff sat reading the *Times*. A mild, soft rain was falling without; the water dripping tepid and dirty through the heavy canopy of a London fog; and a large coal fire blazed within—that fierce furnace which seems so congenial to English taste; not impossibly because it recalls the factory and the smelting-house—the "sacred fire" that seems to inspire patriotism by the suggestion of industry.

Two or three others sat at tables through the room, all so wonderfully alike in dress, feature, and general appearance, that they almost seemed reproductions of the same figure by a series of mirrors; but they were priests of the same "caste," whose forms of thought and expression were precisely the same; and thus as they dropped their scant remarks on the topics of the day, there was not an observation or a phrase of one that might not have fallen from any of the others.

"So," cried one, "they're going to send the Grand Cross to the Duke of Hochmaringen. That will be a special mission. I wonder who'll get it?"

"Cloudesley, I'd say," observed another; "he's always on the watch for anything that comes into the 'extraordinaries.'"

"It will not be Cloudesley," said a third. "He stayed away a year and eight months when they sent him to Tripoli, and there was a rare jaw about it for the estimates."

"Hochmaringen is near Baden, and not a bad place for the summer," said Culduff. "The duchess, I think, was daughter of the margravine."

"Niece, not daughter," said a stern-looking man, who never turned his eyes from his newspaper.

"Niece or daughter, it matters little which," said Culduff, irritated at correction on such a point.

"I protest I'd rather take a turn in South Africa," cried another, "than accept one of those missions to Central Germany."

"You're right, Upton," said a voice from the end of the room; "the cookery is insufferable."

"And the hours. You retire to bed at ten."

"And the ceremonial. Blounte never threw off the lumbago he got from bowing at the court of Bratensdorf."

"They're ignoble sort of things, at the best, and should never be imposed on diplomatic men. These investitures should always be entrusted to court functionaries," said Culduff, haughtily. "If I were at the head of F. O., I'd refuse to charge one of the 'line' with such a mission."

And now something that almost verged on an animated discussion ensued as to what was and what was not the real province of diplomacy; a majority inclining to the opinion that it was derogatory to the high dignity of the calling to meddle with what, at best, was the function of the mere courtier.

"Is that Culduff driving away in that cab?" cried one, as he stood at the window.

"He has carried away my hat, I see, by mistake," said another. "What is he up to at this hour of the morning?"

"I think I can guess," said the grim individual who had corrected him in the matter of genealogy; "he's off to F. O. to ask for the special mission he has just declared that none of us should stoop to accept."

"You've hit it, Grindesley," cried another. "I'll wager a pony you're right."

"It's so like him."

"After all, it's the sort of thing he's best up to. La Ferronaye told me he was the best master of the ceremonies in Europe."

"Why come amongst us at all, then? Why not get himself made a gold-stick, and follow the instincts of his genius?"

"Well, I believe he wants it badly," said one who affected a tone of half kindliness. "They tell me he has not eight hundred a year left him."

"Not four. I doubt if he could lay claim to three."

"He never had in his best day above four or five thousand, though he tells you of his twenty-seven or twenty-eight."

"He had originally about six; but he always lived at the rate of twelve or fifteen, and in mere ostentation too."

"So I've always heard." And then there followed a number of little anecdotes of Culduff's selfishness, his avarice, his meanness, and such like, told with such exactitude as to show that every act of these men's lives was scrupulously watched, and when occasion offered mercilessly recorded.

While they thus sat in judgment over him, Lord Culduff himself was seated at a fire in a dingy old room in Downing Street, the Chief Secretary for Foreign Affairs opposite him. They were talking in a tone of easy familiarity, as men might who occupied the same social station, a certain air of superiority, however, being always apparent in the manner of the Minister towards the subordinate.

"I don't think you can ask for this, Culduff," said the great man, as he puffed his cigar tranquilly in front of him. "You've had three of these special missions already."

"And for the simple reason that I was the one man in England who knew how to do them."

"We don't dispute the way you did them; we only say all the prizes in the wheel should not fall to the same man."

"You have had my proxy for the last five years."

"And we have acknowledged the support—acknowledged it by more than professions."

"I can only say this, that if I had been with the other side, I'd have met somewhat different treatment."

"Don't believe it, Culduff. Every party that is in power inherits its share of obligations. We have never disowned those we owe to you."

"And why am I refused this, then?"

"If you wanted other reasons than those I have given you, I might be able to adduce them—not willingly indeed—but under pressure, and especially in strict confidence."

"Reasons against my having the mission?"

"Reasons against your having the mission."

"You amaze me, my lord. I almost doubt that I have heard you aright. I must, however, insist on your explaining yourself. Am I to understand that there are personal grounds of unfitness?"

The other bowed in assent.

"Have the kindness to let me know them."

"First of all, Culduff, this is to be a family mission—the duchess is a connection of our own royal house—and a cer-

tain degree of display and consequent expense will be required. Your fortune does not admit of this."

"Push on to the more cogent reason, my lord," said Culduff, stiffly.

"Here, then, is the more cogent reason. The court has not forgotten—what possibly the world may have forgotten—some of those passages in your life for which you, perhaps, have no other remorse than that they are not likely to recur; and as you have given no hostages for good behaviour, in the shape of a wife, the court, I say, is sure to veto your appointment. You see it all as clearly as I do."

"So far as I do see," said Culduff, slowly: "the first objection is my want of fortune, the second, my want of a wife?"

"Exactly so."

"Well, my lord, I am able to meet each of these obstacles; my agent has just discovered coal on one of my Irish estates, and I am now in town to make arrangements on a large scale to develop the source of wealth. As to the second disability, I shall pledge myself to present the Viscountess Culduff at the next drawing-room."

"Married already?"

"No, but I may be within a few weeks. In fact, I mean to place myself in such a position, that no one holding your office can pass me over by a pretext, or affect to ignore my claim by affirming that I labour under a disability."

"This sounds like menace, does it not?" said the other as he threw his cigar impatiently from him.

"A mere protocol, my lord, to denote intention."

"Well, I'll submit your name. I'll go further,—I'll support it. Don't leave town for a day or two. Call on Beadlesworth and see Repsley; tell him what you've said to me. If you could promise it was one of his old maiden sisters that you thought of making Lady Culduff, the thing could be clenched at once. But I take it you have other views?"

"I have other views," said he, gravely.

"I'm not indiscreet, and I shall not ask you more on that head. By the way, isn't your leave up, or nearly up?"

"It expired on Wednesday last, and I want it renewed for two months."

"Of course, if we send you on this mission, you'll not want the leave? I had something else to say. What was it?"

"I have not the very vaguest idea."

"Oh! I remember. It was to recommend you not to take your wife from the stage. There's a strong prejudice in a certain quarter as to that—in fact, I may say it couldn't be got over."

"I may relieve you of any apprehensions on that score. Indeed, I don't know what fact in my life should expose me to the mere suspicion."

"Nothing, nothing—except that impulsive generosity of your disposition, which might lead you to do what other men would stop short to count the cost of."

"It would never lead me to derogate, my lord," said he, proudly, as he took his hat, and bowing haughtily left the room.

"The greatest ass in the whole career, and the word is a bold one," said the Minister, as the door closed. "Meanwhile, I must send in his name for this mission, which he is fully equal to. What a happy arrangement it is, than in an age when our flunkies aspire to be gentlemen, there are gentlemen who ask nothing better than to be flunkies!"

CHAPTER XV.

WITH HIS LAWYER.

Though Colonel Bramleigh's visit to town was supposed to be in furtherance of that speculation by which Lord Culduff calculated on wealth and splendour, he had really another object, and while Culduff imagined him to be busy in the City, and deep in shares and stock lists, he was closely closeted with his lawyer, and earnestly poring over a mass of time-worn letters and documents, carefully noting down dates, docketing, and annotating, in a way that showed what importance he attached to the task before him.

"I tell you what, Sedley," said he, as he threw his pen disdainfully from him, and lay back in his chair, "the whole of this move is a party dodge. It is part and parcel of that vile persecution with which the Tory faction pursued me during my late canvass. You remember their vulgar allusions to my father, the brewer, and their coarse jest about my frothy oratory? This attack is but the second act of the same drama."

"I don't think so," mildly rejoined the other party. "Conflicts are sharp enough while the struggle lasts; but they rarely carry their bitterness beyond the day of battle."

"That is an agent's view of the matter," said Bramleigh, with asperity. "The agent always persists in believing the whole thing a sham fight; but though men do talk a great deal of rot and humbug about their principles on the hustings, their personal feelings are just as real, just as acute, and occasionally just as painful, as on any occasion in their lives; and I repeat to you, the trumped-up claim of this foreigner is neither more nor less than a piece of party malignity."

"I cannot agree with you. The correspondence we have just been looking at shows how upwards of forty years ago the same pretensions were put forward, and a man calling himself Montagu Lami Bramleigh declared he was the rightful heir to your estates."

"A rightful heir whose claims could be always compromised by a ten-pound note was scarcely very dangerous."

"Why make any compromise at all if the fellow was clearly an impostor?"

"For the very reason that you yourself now counsel a similar course: to avoid the scandal of a public trial. To escape all those insolent comments which a party press is certain to pass on a political opponent."

"That could scarcely have been apprehended from the Bramleigh I speak of, who was clearly poor, illiterate, and friendless; whereas the present man has, from some source or other, funds to engage eminent counsel and retain one of the first men at the bar."

"I protest, Sedley, you puzzle me," said Bramleigh, with an angry sparkle in his eye. "A few moments back you treated all this pretension as a mere pretext for extorting money, and now you talk of this fellow and his claim as subjects that may one day be matter for the decision of a jury. Can you reconcile two views so diametrically opposite?"

"I think I can. It is at law as in war. The feint may be carried on to a real attack whenever the position assailed be possessed of an over-confidence or but ill defended. It might be easy enough, perhaps, to deal with this man. Let him have some small success, however; let him gain a verdict, for instance, in one of those petty suits for ejectment, and his case at once becomes formidable."

"All this," said Bramleigh, "proceeds on the assumption that there is something in the fellow's claim?"

"Unquestionably."

"I declare," said Bramleigh, rising and pacing the room, "I have not temper for this discussion. My mind has not been disciplined to that degree of refinement that I can accept a downright swindle as a demand founded on justice."

"Let us prove it a swindle, and there is an end of it."

"And will you tell me, sir," said he, passionately, "that every gentleman holds his estates on the condition that the title may be contested by any impostor who can dupe people into advancing money to set the law in motion?"

"When such proceedings are fraudulent a very heavy punishment awaits them."

"And what punishment of the knave equals the penalty inflicted on the honest man in exposure, shame, insolent remarks, and worse than even these, a contemptuous pity for

that reverse of fortune which newspapers writers always announce as an inevitable consummation?"

"These are all hard things to bear, but I don't suspect they ever deterred any man from holding an estate."

The half jocular tone of his remark rather jarred on Bramleigh's sensibilities, and he continued to walk the room in silence; at last, stopping short, he wheeled round and said,—

"Do you adhere to your former opinion? would you try a compromise?"

"I would. The man has a case quite good enough to interest a speculative lawyer—good enough to go before a jury—good enough for everything but success. One half what the defence would cost you will probably satisfy his expectations, not to speak of all you will spare yourself in unpleasantness and exposure."

"It is a hard thing to stoop to," said Bramleigh, painfully.

"It need not be, at least not to the extent you imagine; and when you throw your eye over your lawyer's bill of costs, the phrase 'incidental expenses' will spare your feelings any more distinct reference to this transaction."

"A most considerate attention. And now for the practical part. Who is this man's lawyer?"

"A most respectable practitioner, Kelson, of Temple Court. A personal friend of my own."

"And what terms would you propose?"

"I'd offer five thousand, and be prepared to go to eight, possibly to ten."

"To silence a mere menace."

"Exactly. It's a mere menace to-day, but six months hence it may be something more formidable. It is a curious case, cleverly contrived and ingeniously put together. I don't say that we couldn't smash it; such carpentry always has a chink or an open somewhere. Meanwhile the scandal is spreading over not only England, but over the world, and no matter how favourable the ultimate issue, there will always remain in men's minds the recollection that the right to your estate was contested, and that you had to defend your possession."

"I had always thought till now," said Bramleigh, slowly, "that the legal mind attached very little importance to the flying scandals that amuse society. You appear to accord them weight and influence."

"I am not less a man of the world because I am a lawyer, Colonel Bramleigh," said the other, half tartly.

"If this must be done the sooner it be over the better. A man of high station—a peer—is at this moment paying such attention to one of my daughters that I may expect at any moment, to-day perhaps, to receive a formal proposal for her hand. I do not suspect that the threat of an unknown claimant to my property would disturb his lordship's faith in my security or my station, but the sensitive dislike of men of his class to all publicity that does not redound to honour or distinction—the repugnance to whatever draws attention to them for aught but court favour or advancement—might well be supposed to have its influence with him, and I think it would be better to spare him—to spare us, too—this exposure."

"I'll attend to it immediately. Kelson hinted to me that the claimant was now in England."

"I was not aware of that."

"Yes, he is over here now, and I gather, too, has contrived to interest some people in his pretensions."

"Does he affect the station of a gentleman?"

"Thorougly; he is, I am told, well-mannered, prepossessing in appearance, and presentable in every respect."

"Let us ask him over to Castello, Sedley," said Bramleigh, laughing.

"I've known of worse strategy," said the lawyer, dryly.

"What! are you actually serious?"

"I say that such a move might not be the worst step to an amicable settlement. In admitting the assailant to see all the worth and value of the fortress, it would also show him the resources for defence, and he might readily compute what poor chances were his against such odds."

"Still, I doubt if I could bring myself to consent to it. There is a positive indignity in making any concession to such a palpable imposture.

"Not palpable till proven. The most unlikely cases have now and then pushed some of our ablest men to upset. Attack can always choose its own time, its own ground, and is master of almost every condition of the combat."

"I declare, Sedley, if this man had retained your services to make a good bargain for him, he could scarcely have selected a more able agent."

"You could not more highly compliment the zeal I am exercising in your service."

"Well, I take it I must leave the whole thing in your hands. I shall not prolong my stay in town. I wanted to do

something in the city, but I find these late crashes in the banks have spread such terror and apprehension, that nobody will advance a guinea on anything. There is an admirable opening just now—coal."

"In Egypt?"

"No, in Ireland."

"Ah, in Ireland? That's very different. You surely cannot expect capital will take *that* channel?"

"You are an admirable lawyer, Sedley. I am told London has not your equal as a special pleader, but let me tell you you are not either a projector or a politician. I am both, and I declare to you that this country which you deride and distrust is the California of Great Britain. Write to me at your earliest; finish this business if you can, out of hand, and if you make good terms for me I'll send you some shares in an enterprise—an Irish enterprise—which will pay you a better dividend than some of your East county railroads."

"Have you changed the name of your place? Your son, Mr. John Bramleigh, writes 'Bishop's Folly' at the top of his letter."

"It is called Castello, sir. I am not responsible for the silly caprices of a sailor."

CHAPTER XVI.

SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

Lord Culduff and Colonel Bramleigh spoke little to each other as they journeyed back to Ireland. Each fell back upon the theme personally interesting to him, and cared not to impart it to his neighbour. They were not like men who had so long travelled the same road in life that by a dropping word a whole train of associations can be conjured up, and familiar scenes and people be passed in review before the mind.

A few curt sentences uttered by Bramleigh told how matters stood in the City—money was "tight" being the text of all he said; but of that financial sensitiveness that shrinks timidly from all enterprise after a period of crash and bankruptcy, Culduff could make nothing. In his own craft nobody dreaded the fire because his neighbour's child was burned, and he could not see why capitalists should not learn something from diplomacy.

Nor was Colonel Bramleigh, on his side, much better able to follow the subjects which had interest for his companion. The rise and fall of kingdoms, the varying fortunes of states, impressed themselves upon the City man by the condition of financial credit they implied, and a mere glance at the price of a foreign loan conveyed to his appreciation a more correct notion of a people than all the blue-books and all the correspondence with plenipotentiaries.

These were not Culduff's views. His code—it is the code of all his calling—was: No country of any pretensions, no more than any gentleman of blood and family, ever became bankrupt. Pressed, hard-pushed, he would say, Yes! we all of us have had our difficulties, and to surmount them occasionally we are driven to make unprofitable bargains, but we "rub through," and so will Greece and Spain and those other countries where they are borrowing at twelve or twenty per cent., and raise a loan each year to discharge the dividends.

Not only, then, were these two little gifted with qualities to render them companionable to each other, but from the totally different way every event and every circumstance presented itself to their minds, each grew to conceive for the other a sort of depreciatory estimate as of one who only could see a very small part of any subject, and even that coloured and tinted by the hues of his own daily calling.

"So, then," said Culduff, after listening to a somewhat lengthy explanation from Bramleigh of why and how it was that there was nothing to be done financially at the moment, —"so, then, I am to gather the plan of a company to work the mines is out of the question?"

"I would rather call it deferred than abandoned," was the cautious reply.

"In my career what we postpone we generally prohibit. And what other course is open to us?"

"We can wait, my lord, we can wait. Coal is not like indigo or tobacco; it is not a question of hours—whether the crop be saved or ruined. We can wait."

"Very true, sir; but *I* cannot wait. There are some urgent calls upon me just now, the men who are pressing which will not be so complaisant as to wait either."

"I was always under the impression, my lord, that your position as a peer, and the nature of the services that you were engaged in, were sufficient to relieve you from all the embarrassments that attach to humbler men in difficulties?"

"They don't arrest, but they dun us, sir; and they dun with an insistance and an amount of menace, too, that middle-class people can form no conception of. They besiege the departments we serve under with their vulgar complaints, and if the rumour gets abroad that one of us is about to be advanced to a governorship or an embassy, they assemble in Downing Street like a Reform demonstration. I declare to you I had to make my way through a lane of creditors from the Privy Council Office to the private entrance to F. O., my hands full of their confounded accounts—one fellow, a boot-maker, actually having pinned his bill to the skirt of my coat as I went. And the worst of these impertinences is, that they give a Minister who is indisposed towards you a handle for refusing your just claims. I have just come through such an ordeal: I have been told that my debts are to be a bar to my promotion."

The almost tremulous horror which he gave to this last

expression—as of an outrage unknown to mankind—warned Bramleigh to be silent.

"I perceive that you do not find it easy to believe this, but I pledge my word to you it is true. It is not forty-eight hours since a Secretary of State assumed to make my personal liabilities—the things which, if any things are a man's own, are certainly so—to make these an objection to my taking a mission of importance. I believe he was sorry for his indiscretion; I have reason to suppose that it was a blunder he will not readily repeat."

"And you obtained your appointment?" asked Bramleigh.

"Minister extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the court of Hochmaringen," said Culduff, with a slow and pompous enunciation.

Bramleigh, pardonably ignorant of the geography of the important state alluded to, merely bowed in acknowledgment. "Is there much—much to do at one of these courts?" asked he, diffidently, after a pause.

"In one sense there is a great deal. In Germany the action of the greater cabinets is always to be discovered in the intrigues of the small dukedoms, just as you gather the temper of the huntsman from the way he lashes the hounds. You may, therefore, send a 'crétin,' if you like, to Berlin or Vienna; you want a man of tact and address at Sigmaringen or Kleinesel-stadt. They begin to see that here at home, but it took them years to arrive at it."

Whether Bramleigh was confounded by the depth of this remark, or annoyed by the man who made it, he relapsed into a dreamy silence that soon passed into sleep, into which state the illustrious diplomatist followed, and thus was the journey made till the tall towers of Castello came into view, and they found themselves rapidly careering along with four posters towards the grand entrance. The tidings of their coming soon reached the drawing-room, and the hall was filled by the young members of the family to welcome them. "Remember," said Bramleigh, "we have had nothing but a light luncheon since morning. Come and join us, if you like, in the dining-room, but let us have some dinner as soon as may be."

It is not pleasant, perhaps, to be talked to while eating by persons quite unemployed by the pleasures of the table; but there is a sort of "free and easy" at such times not wholly unconducive to agreeable intercourse, and many little cares and attentions, impossible or unmeaning in the more formal

habits of the table, are now graceful adjuncts to the incident. Thus was it that Marion contrived by some slight service or other to indicate to Lord Culduff that he was an honoured guest; and when she filled his glass with champagne, and poured a little into her own to pledge him, the great man felt a sense of triumph that warmed the whole of that region where, anatomically, his heart was situated. While the others around were engaged in general conversation, she led him to talk of his journey to town, and what he had done there; and he told her somewhat proudly of the high mission about to be entrusted to him, not omitting to speak of the haughty tone he had used towards the Minister, and the spirit he had evinced in asserting his just claims. "We had what threatened at one time to be a stormy interview. When a man like myself has to recall the list of his services, the case may well be considered imminent. He pushed me to this, and I accepted his challenge. I told him, if I am not rich, it is because I have spent my fortune in maintaining the dignity of the high stations I have filled. The breaches in my fortune are all honourable wounds. He next objected to what I could not but admit as a more valid barrier to my claims. Can you guess it?"

She shook her head in dissent. It could not be his rank, or anything that bore upon his rank. Was it possible that official prudery had been shocked by the noble lord's social derelictions? Had the scandal of that old elopement survived to tarnish his fame and injure his success? and she blushed as she thought of the theme to which he invited her approach.

"I see you do divine it," said he, smiling courteously.

"I suspect not," said she, diffidently, and still blushing deeper.

"It would be a great boon to me—a most encouraging assurance," said he, in a low and earnest voice, "if I could believe that your interest in me went so far as actually to read the story and anticipate the catastrophe of my life. Tell me then, I entreat you, that you know what I allude to."

She hesitated. "Was it possible," thought she, "that he wished me to admit that my opinion of him was not prejudiced by this 'escapade' of thirty years ago? Is he asking me to own that I am tolerant towards such offences?" His age, his tone generally, his essentially foreign breeding, made this very possible. Her perplexity was great, and her confusion increased with every minute.

At this critical moment there was a general move to go into the drawing-room, and as he gave her his arm, Lord Culduff drew her gently towards him, and said in his most insinuating voice, "Let me hear my fate."

"I declare, my lord," said she, hesitatingly, "I don't know what to say. Moralists and worldly people have two different measures for these things. I have no pretensions to claim a place with the former, and I rather shrink from accepting all the ideas of the latter. At all events, I would suppose that after a certain lapse of time, when years have gone over—profitably, I would hope—in fact, I mean—in short, I do not know what I mean."

"You mean, perhaps, that it is not at my time of life men take such a step with prudence. Is that it?" asked he, trying in vain to keep down the irritation that moved him.

"Well, my lord, I believe about the prudence there can scarcely be two opinions, whether a man be young or old. These things are wrong in themselves, and nothing can make them right."

"I protest I am unable to follow you," said he, tartly.

"All the better, my lord, if I be only leading you where you have no inclination to wander. I see Nelly wants me at the piano."

"And you prefer accompanying *her* to *me?*" said he, reproachfully.

"At least, my lord, we shall be in harmony, which is scarcely our case here."

He sighed, almost theatrically, as he relinquished her arm, and retiring to a remote part of the room, affected to read a newspaper. Mr. Cutbill, however, soon drew a chair near, and engaged him in conversation.

"So Bramleigh has done nothing," whispered Cutbill, as he bent forward. "He did not, so far as I gather, even speak of the mine in the City."

"He said it was of no use; the time was unfavourable."

"Did you ever know it otherwise? Isn't it with that same cant of an unfavourable time these men always add so much to the premium on every undertaking?"

"Sir, I am unable to answer your question. It is my first —I would I may be able to say, and my last—occasion to deal with this class of people."

"They're not a bad set, after all; only you must take them in the way they're used to—the way they understand."

"It is a language I have yet to learn, Mr. Cutbill."

"The sooner your lordship sets to work at it the better then."

Lord Culduff wheeled round in his chair, and stared with amazement at the man before him. He saw, however, the unmistakable signs of his having drunk freely, and his bloodshot eyes declared that the moment was not favourable for calm discussion.

"It would be as well, perhaps, to adjourn this conversation," said Culduff.

"I'm for business—anywhere and at any moment. I made one of the best hits I ever chanced upon after a smash on the Trent Valley line. There was Boulders—of the firm of Skale and Boulders Brothers—had his shoulder dislocated and two of his front teeth knocked out. He was lying with a lot of scantling and barrel-staves over him, and he cried out, 'Is there any one there?' I said, 'Yes; Cutbill. Tom Cutbill, of Viceregal Terrace, St. John's Wood.'"

Lord Culduff's patience could stand no more, and he arose with a slight bow and moved haughtily away. Cutbill, however, was quickly at his side. "You must hear the rest of this; it was a matter of close on ten thousand pounds to me, and this is the way it came out——"

"I felicitate you heartily, sir, on your success, but beg I may be spared the story of it."

"You've heard worse. Egad, I'd not say you haven't told worse. It's not every fellow, I promise you, has his wits about him at a moment when people are shouting for help, and an express train standing on its head in a cutting, and a tender hanging over a viaduct."

"Sir, there are worse inflictions than even this."

"Eh, what?" said Cutbill, crossing his arms on his chest, and looking fully in the other's face; but Lord Culduff moved quietly on, and, approaching a table where Ellen was seated, said, "I'm coming to beg for a cup of tea;" not a trace of excitement or irritation to be detected in his voice or manner. He loitered for a few moments at the table, talking lightly and pleasantly on indifferent subjects, and then moved carelessly away till he found himself near the door, when he made a precipitate escape and hurried up to his room.

It was his invariable custom to look at himself carefully in the glass whenever he came home at night. As a general might have examined the list of killed and wounded after an action, computing with himself the cost of victory or defeat, so did this veteran warrior of a world's campaign go carefully over all the signs of wear and tear, the hard lines of

pain or chequered colouring of agitation, which his last engagement might have inflicted.

As he sat down before his mirror now, he was actually shocked to see what ravages a single evening had produced. The circles around his eyes were deeply indented, the corners of his mouth drawn down so fixedly and firmly that all attempts to conjure up a smile were failures, while a purple tint beneath his rouge totally destroyed that delicate colouring which was wont to impart the youthful look to his features.

The vulgar impertinence of Cutbill made indeed but little impression upon him. An annoyance while it lasted, it still left nothing for memory that could not be dismissed with ease. It was Marion. It was what she had said that weighed so painfully on his heart, wounding where he was most intensely and delicately sensitive. She had told him—what had she told him? He tried to recall her exact words, but he could not. They were in reply to remarks of his own, and owed all their significance to the context. One thing she certainly had said—that there were certain steps in life about which the world held but one opinion, and the allusion was to men marrying late in life; and then she added a remark as to the want of "sympathy"—or was it "harmony" she called it?—between them. How strange that he could not remember more exactly all that passed, he, who, after his interviews with Ministers and great men, could go home and send off in an official despatch the whole dialogue of the audience. But why seek for the precise expressions she employed? The meaning should surely be enough for him, and that was—there was no denying it—that the disparity of their ages was a bar to his pretensions. "Had our ranks in life been alike, there might have been force in her observation; but she forgets that a coronet encircles a brow like a wreath of youth;" and he adjusted the curls of his wig as he spoke, and smiled at himself more successfully than he had done before.

"On the whole, perhaps it is better," said he, as he arose and walked the room. "A mésalliance can only be justified by great beauty or great wealth. One must do a consumedly rash thing, or a wonderfully sharp one, to come out well with the world. Forty thousand, and a good-looking girl—she isn't more—would not satisfy the just expectations of society, which, with men like myself, are severely exacting."

He had met with a repulse, he could not deny it, and the

sense of pain it inflicted galled him to the quick. To be sure, the thing occurred in a remote, out-of-the-way spot, where there were no people to discover or retail the story. It was not as if it chanced in some cognate land of society, where such incidents get immediate currency and form the gossip of every coterie. Who was ever to hear of what passed in an Irish country-house? Marion herself indeed might write it—she most probably would—but to whom? To some friend as little in the world as herself, and none knew better than Lord Culduff of how few people the "world" was composed. It was a defeat, but a defeat that need never be gazetted. And, after all, are not the worst things in all our reverses, the comments that are passed upon them? Are not the censures of our enemies and the condolences of our friends sometimes harder to bear than the misfortunes that have evoked them?

What Marion's manner towards him might be in future, was also a painful reflection. It would naturally be a triumphant incident in her life to have rejected such an offer. Would she be eager to parade this fact before the world? Would she try to let people know that she had refused him? This was possible. He felt that such a slight would tarnish the whole glory of his life, whose boast was to have done many things that were actually wicked, but not one that was merely weak.

The imminent matter was to get out of his present situation without defeat. To quit the field, but not as a beaten army; and revolving how this was to be done he sunk off to sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT CASTELLO.

A PRIVATE letter from a friend had told Jack Bramlei that his father's opposition to the Government had consid ably damaged his chance of being employed, but that he possibly might get a small command on the African station. With what joy then did he receive the "official," marked on H.M.'s service, informing him that he was appointed to the *Sneezer* despatch gunboat, to serve in the Mediterranean, and enjoining him to repair to town without unnecessary delay, to receive further orders.

He had forborne, as we have seen, to tell Julia his former tidings. They were not indeed of a nature to rejoice over, but here was great news. He only wanted two more years to be qualified for his "Post," and once a captain, he would have a position which might warrant his asking Julia to be his wife, and thus was it that the great dream of his whole existence was interwoven into his career, and his advancement as a sailor linked with his hopes as a lover; and surely it is well for us that ambitions in life appeal to us in other and humbler ways than by the sense of triumph, and that there are better rewards for success than either the favour of princes or the insignia of rank.

To poor Jack, looking beyond that two years, it was not a three-decker, nor even frigate, it was the paradise of a cottage overgrown with sweetbriar and honeysuckle, that presented itself,—and a certain graceful figure, gauzy and floating, sitting in the porch, while he lay at her feet, lulled by the drowsy ripple of the little trout-stream that ran close by. So possessed was he by this vision, so entirely and wholly did it engross him, that it was with difficulty he gave coherent replies to the questions poured in upon him at the breakfast-table, as to the sort of service he was about to be engaged in, and whether it was as good or a better thing than he had been expecting.

"I wish you joy, Jack," said Augustus. "You're a lucky

dog to get afloat again so soon. You haven't been full six months on half-pay."

"I wish you joy too," said Temple, "and am thankful to Fate it is you, and not I, have to take the command of H.M.'s gunboat *Sneezer*."

"Perhaps, all things considered, it is as well as it is," said Jack, dryly.

"It is a position of some importance. I mean it is not the mere command of a small vessel," said Marion haughtily; for she was always eager that every incident that befell the family should redound to their distinction, and subserve their onward march to greatness.

"Oh, Jack," whispered Nelly, "let us walk over to the cottage, and tell them the news;" and Jack blushed as he squeezed her hand in gratitude for the speech.

"I almost wonder they gave you this, Jack," said his father, "seeing how active a part I took against them; but I suppose there is some truth in the saying that Ministers would rather soothe enemies than succour friends."

"Don't you suspect, papa, that Lord Culduff may have had some share in this event? His influence, I know, is very great with his party," said Marion.

"I hope and trust not," burst out Jack; "rather than owe my promotion to that bewigged old dandy, I'd go and keep a lighthouse."

"A most illiberal speech," said Temple. "I was about to employ a stronger word, but still not stronger than my sense of its necessity."

"Remember, Temple," replied Jack, "I have no possible objection to his being *your* patron. I only protest that he shan't be *mine*. He may make you something ordinary or extraordinary to-morrow, and I'll never quarrel about it."

"I am grateful for the concession," said the other, bowing.

"If it was Lord Culduff that got you this step," said Colonel Bramleigh, "I must say nothing could be more delicate than his conduct; he never so much as hinted to me that he had taken trouble in the matter."

"He is *such* a gentleman!" said Marion, with a very enthusiastic emphasis on the word.

"Well, perhaps it's a very ignoble confession," said Nelly, "but I frankly own I'd rather Jack owed his good fortune to his good fame than to all the peers in the calendar."

"What pains Ellen takes," said Marion, "to show that her ideas of life and the world are not those of the rest of us."

"She has me with her whenever she goes into the lobby," said Jack, "or I'll pair with Temple, who is sure to be on the stronger side."

"Your censure I accept as a compliment," said Temple.

"And is this all our good news has done for us,—to set us exchanging tart speeches and sharp repartees with each other?" said Colonel Bramleigh. "I declare it is a very ungracious way to treat pleasant tidings. Go out, boys, and see if you couldn't find some one to dine with us, and wet Jack's commission as they used to call it long ago."

"We can have the L'Estranges and our amiable neighbour Captain Craufurd," said Marion; "but I believe our resources end with these."

"Why not look up the Frenchman you smashed some weeks ago, Jack?" said Augustus; "he ought to be about by this time, and it would only be common decency to show him some attention."

"With all my heart. I'll do anything you like but talk French with him. But where is he to be found?"

"He stops with Longworth," said Augustus, "which makes the matter awkward. Can we invite one without the other, and can we open our acquaintance with Longworth by an invitation to dinner?"

"Certainly not," chimed in Temple. "First acquaintance admits of no breaches of etiquette. Intimacies may, and rarely too, forgive such."

"What luck to have such a pilot to steer us through the narrow channel of proprieties," cried Jack, laughing.

"I think, too, it would be as well to remember," resumed Temple, "that Lord Culduff is our guest, and to whatever accidents of acquaintanceship we may be ready to expose ourselves, we have no right to extend these casualties to *him*."

"I suspect we are not likely to see his lordship to-day, at least; he has sent down his man to beg he may be excused from making his appearance at dinner: a slight attack of gout confines him to his room," said Marion.

"That's not the worst bit of news I've heard to-day," broke in Jack. "Dining in that old cove's company is the next thing to being tried by a court-martial. I fervently hope he'll be on the sick list till I take my departure."

"As to getting these people together to-day, it's out of the question," said Augustus. "Let us say Saturday next, and try what we can do."

This was agreed upon, Temple being deputed to ride over to Longworth's, leaving to his diplomacy to make what further advances events seemed to warrant,—a trustful confidence in his tact to conduct a nice negotiation being a flattery more than sufficient to recompense his trouble. Jack and Nelly would repair to the cottage to secure the L'Estranges. Craufurd could be apprised by a note.

"Has Cutbill got the gout, too?" asked Jack. "I have not seen him this morning."

"No; that very cool gentleman took out my cob pony, Fritz, this morning at daybreak," said Augustus, "saying he was off to the mines at Lisconnor, and wouldn't be back till evening."

"And do you mean to let such a liberty pass unnoticed?" asked Temple.

"A good deal will depend upon how Fritz looks after his journey. If I see that the beast has not suffered, it is just possible I may content myself with a mere intimation that I trust the freedom may not be repeated."

"You told me Anderson offered you two hundred for that cob," broke in Temple.

"Yes, and asked how much more would tempt me to sell him."

"If he were a peer of the realm, and took such a liberty with me, I'd not forgive him," said Temple, as he arose and left the room in a burst of indignation.

"I may say we are a very high-spirited family," said Jack, gravely, "and I'll warn the world not to try any familiarities with us."

"Come away, naughty boy," whispered Eleanor; "you are always trailing your coat for some one to stand upon."

"Tell me, Nelly," said he, as they took their way through the pinewood that led to the cottage, "tell me, Nelly, am I right or wrong in my appreciation—for I really want to be just and fair in the matter—are we Bramleighs confounded snobs?"

The downright honest earnestness with which he put the question made her laugh heartily, and for some seconds left her unable to answer him.

"I half suspect that we may be, Jack," said she, still smiling.

"I'm certain of one thing," continued he in the same earnest tone, "our distinguished guest deems us such. There is a sort of simpering enjoyment of all that goes on

around him, and a condescending approval of us that seems to say, 'Go on, you'll catch the tone yet. You're not doing badly by any means.' He pushed me to the very limit of my patience the other day with this, and I had to get up from luncheon and leave the house to avoid being openly rude to him. Do you mind my lighting a cigar, Nelly, for I've got myself so angry that I want a weed to calm me down again?"

"Let us talk of something else; for on this theme I'm not much better tempered than yourself."

"There's a dear good girl," said he, drawing her towards him, and kissing her cheek. "I'd have sworn you felt as I did about this old fop; and we must be arrant snobs, Nelly, or else his coming down amongst us here would not have broken us all up, setting us exchanging sneers and scoffs, and criticizing each other's knowledge of life. Confound the old humbug; let us forget him."

They walked along without exchanging a word for full ten minutes or more, till they reached the brow of the cliff, from which the pathway led down to the cottage. "I wonder when I shall stand here again?" said he, pausing. "Not that I'm going on any hazardous service, or to meet a more formidable enemy than a tart flag-captain; but the world has such strange turns and changes that a couple of years may do anything with a man's destiny."

"A couple of years may make you a post-captain, Jack; and that will be quite enough to change your destiny."

He looked affectionately towards her for a moment, and then turned away to hide the emotion he could not master.

"And then, Jack," said she, caressingly, "it will be a very happy day that shall bring us to this spot again."

"Who knows, Nelly?" said he, with a degree of agitation that surprised her. "I haven't told you that Julia and I had a quarrel the last time we met."

"A quarrel!"

"Well, it was something very like one. I told her there were things about her manner,—certain ways she had that I didn't like; and I spoke very seriously to her on the subject. I didn't go beating about, but said she was too much of a coquette."

"Oh, Jack!"

"It's all very well to be shocked, and cry out, 'Oh, Jack!' but isn't it true? haven't you seen it yourself? hasn't Marion said some very strange things about it?"

LOOKING DOWN FROM THE CLIFF.

"My dear Jack, I needn't tell you that we girls are not always fair in our estimates of each other, even when we think we are,—and it is not always that we want to think so. Julia is not a coquette in any sense that the word carries censure, and you were exceedingly wrong to tell her she was."

"That's how it is!" cried he, pitching his cigar away in impatience. "There's a freemasonry amongst you that calls you all to arms the moment one is attacked. Isn't it open to a man to tell the girl he hopes to make his wife that there are things in her manner he doesn't approve of and would like changed?"

"Certainly not; at least it would require some nicer tact than yours to approach such a theme with safety."

"Temple, perhaps, could do it," said he, sneeringly.

"Temple certainly would not attempt it."

Jack made a gesture of impatience, and, as if desirous to change the subject, said, "What's the matter with our distinguished guest? Is he ill, that he won't dine below-stairs to-day?"

"He calls it a slight return of his Greek fever, and begs to be excused from presenting himself at dinner."

"He and Temple have been writing little three-cornered notes to each other all the morning. I suppose it is diplomatic usage."

The tone of irritation he spoke in seemed to show that he was actually seeking for something to vent his anger upon, and trying to provoke some word of contradiction or dissent; but she was silent, and for some seconds they walked on without speaking.

"Look!" cried he, suddenly; "there goes Julia. Do you see her yonder on the path up the cliff; and who is that clambering after her? I'll be shot if it's not Lord Culduff."

"Julia has got her drawing-book, I see. They're on some sketching excursion."

"He wasn't long in throwing off his Greek fever, eh?" cried Jack, indignantly. "It's cool, isn't it, to tell the people in whose house he is stopping that he is too ill to dine with them, and then set out gallivanting in this fashion?"

"Poor old man!" said she, in a tone of half-scornful pity.

"Was I right about Julia now?" cried he, angrily. "I told you for whose captivation all her little gracefulnesses were intended. I saw it the first night he stood beside her

at the piano. As Marion said, she is determined to bring him down. She saw it as well as I did."

"What nonsense you are talking, Jack; as if Julia would condescend——"

"There's no condescension, Nelly," he broke in. "The man is a lord, and the woman he marries will be a peeress, and there's not another country in Europe in which that word means as much. I take it, we needn't go on to the cottage now?"

"I suppose we could scarcely overtake them?"

"Overtake them! Why should we try? Even *my* tact, Nelly, that you sneered at so contemptuously a while ago, would save me from such a blunder. Come, let's go home and forget, if we can, all that we came about. *I* at least will try and do so."

"My dear, dear Jack, this is very foolish jealousy."

"I am not jealous, Nelly. I'm angry; but it is with myself. I ought to have known what humble pretensions mine were, and I ought to have known how certainly a young lady, bred as young ladies are now-a-days, would regard them as less than humble; but it all comes of this idle shore-going, good-for-nothing life. They'll not catch me at it again, that's all."

"Just listen to me patiently, Jack. Listen to me for one moment."

"Not for half a moment. I can guess everything you want to say to me, and I tell you frankly, I don't care to hear it. Tell me whatever you like to-morrow——"

He tried to finish his speech, but his voice grew thick and faltering, and he turned away and was silent.

They spoke little to each other as they walked homewards. A chance remark on the weather, or the scenery, was all that passed till they reached the little lawn before the door.

"You'll not forget your pledge, Jack, for to-morrow?" said Ellen, as he turned towards her before ascending the steps.

"I'll not forget it," said he, coldly, and he moved off as he spoke, and entered an alley of the shrubbery.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DULL DINNER.

The family dinner on that day at Castello was somewhat dull. The various attempts to secure a party for the ensuing Saturday, which had been fixed on to celebrate Jack's promotion, had proved failures. When Temple arrived at Longworth's he learned that the host and his guest were from home and not to return for some days—we have seen how it fared as to the L'Estranges—so that the solitary success was Captain Craufurd, a gentleman who certainly had not won the suffrages of the great house.

There were two vacant places besides at the table; for butlers are fond of recording, by napkins and covers, how certain of our friends assume to treat us, and thus as it were contrast their own formal observances of duty with the laxer notions of their betters.

"Lord Culduff is not able to dine with us," said Colonel Bramleigh, making the apology as well to himself as to the company.

"No, papa," said Marion; "he hopes to appear in the drawing-room in the evening."

"If not too much tired by his long walk," broke in Jack.

"What walk are you dreaming of?" asked Marion.

"An excursion he made this morning down the coast, sketching or pretending to sketch. Nelly and I saw him clambering up the side of a cliff——"

"Oh, quite impossible; you must be mistaken."

"No," said Nelly, "there was no mistake. I saw him as plainly as I see you now; besides, it is not in these wild regions so distinguished a figure is like to find its counterpart."

"But why should he not take his walk? why not sketch, or amuse himself in any way he pleased?" asked Temple.

"Of course it was open to him to do so," said the Colonel; "only that to excuse his absence he ought not to have made a pretext of being ill."

"I think men are 'ill' just as they are 'out,'" said

Temple. "I am ill if I am asked to do what is disagreeable to me, as I am out to the visit of a bore."

"So that to dine with us was disagreeable to Lord Culduff?" asked Jack.

"It was evidently either an effort to task his strength, or an occasion which called for more exertion than he felt equal to," said Temple, pompously.

"By Jove!" cried Jack, "I hope I'll never be a great man! I trust sincerely *I* may never arrive at that eminence in which it will task my energies to eat my dinner and chat with the people on either side of me."

"Lord Culduff converses: he does not chat; please to note the distinction, Jack."

"That's like telling me he doesn't walk but he swaggers."

It was fortunate at this moment, critical enough as regarded the temper of all parties, that Mr. Cutbill entered, full of apologies for being late, and bursting to recount the accidents that befell him and all the incidents of his day. A quick glance around the table assured him of Lord Culduff's absence, and it was evident from the sparkle of his eye that the event was not disagreeable to him.

"Is our noble friend on the sick list?" asked he, with a smile.

"Indisposed," said Temple, with the air of one who knew the value of a word that was double-shotted.

"I've got news that will soon rally him," continued Cutbill. "They've struck a magnificent vein this morning, and within eighty yards of the surface. Plmmys, the Welsh inspector, pronounced it good Cardiff, and says, from the depth of 'the lode,' that it must go a long way."

"Harding did not give me as encouraging news yesterday," said Colonel Bramleigh, with a dubious smile.

"My tidings date from this morning—yesterday was the day before the battle; besides, what does Harding know about coal?"

"He knows a little about everything," said Augustus.

"That makes all the difference. What people want is not the men who know things currently, but know them well and thoroughly. Eh, Captain," said he to Jack; "what would you say to popular notions about the navy?"

"Cutty's right," said Jack. "Amateurship is all humbug."

"Who is Longworth?" asked Cutbill. "Philip Longworth?"

"A neighbour of ours; we are not acquainted, but we know that there is such a person," said Colonel Bramleigh.

"He opines," continued Cutbill, "that this vein of ours runs direct from his land, and I suspect he's not wrong; and he wants to know what we mean to do—he'll either sell or buy. He came over this morning to Kilmannock with a French friend, and we took our breakfast together. Nice fellows both of them, and wide awake, too, especially the Frenchman. He was with Lesseps in Egypt, in what capacity I couldn't find out; but I see he's a shrewd fellow."

"With Lesseps?" said Colonel Bramleigh, showing a quicker and more eager interest than before, for his lawyer had told him that the French claimant to his property had been engaged on the works of the Suez Canal.

"Yes; he spoke as if he knew Lesseps well, and talked of the whole undertaking like one who understood it."

"And what is he doing here?"

"Writing a book, I fancy; an Irish tour—one of those mock sentimentalities, with bad politics and false morality, Frenchmen ventilate about England. He goes poking into the cabins and asking the people about their grievances; and now he says he wants to hear the other side, and learn what the gentlemen say."

"We'll have to ask him over here," said Colonel Bramleigh, coolly, as if the thought had occurred to him then for the first time.

"He'll amuse you, I promise you," said Cutbill.

"I'd like to meet him," said Jack. "I had the ill-luck to bowl him over in the hunting-field, and cost him a broken leg. I'd like to make all the excuses in my power to him."

"He bears no malice about it; he said it was all his own fault, and that you did your best to pick him up, but your horse bolted with you."

"Let's have him to dinner by all means," said Augustus; "and now that Temple has made a formal visit, I take it we might invite him by a polite note."

"You must wait till he returns the call," said Marion, stiffly.

"Not if we want to show a courteous desire to make his acquaintance," said Temple. "Attentions can be measured as nicely and as minutely as medicaments."

"All I say," said Jack, "is, have him soon, or I may chance to miss him; and I'm rather curious to have a look at him."

Colonel Bramleigh turned a full look at Jack, as though his words had some hidden meaning in them, but the frank and easy expression of the sailor's face reassured him at once.

"I hope the fellow won't put us in his book," said Temple. "You are never quite safe with these sort of people."

"Are we worth recording?" asked Jack, with a laugh.

Temple was too indignant to make any answer, and Cutbill went on: "The authorship is only a suspicion of mine, remember. It was from seeing him constantly jotting down little odds and ends in his note-book that I came to that conclusion; and Frenchmen are not much given to minute inquiries if they have not some definite object in view."

Again was Bramleigh's attention arrested, but, as before, he saw that the speaker meant no more than the words in their simplest acceptance conveyed.

A violent ringing of the door-bell startled the company, and after a moment's pause of expectancy, a servant entered to say, that a Government messenger had arrived with some important dispatches for Lord Culduff, which required personal delivery and acceptance.

"Will you step up, Mr. Cutbill, and see if his lordship is in his room?"

"I'll answer for it he's not," said Jack to his father.

Cutbill rose, however, and went on his mission, but instead of returning to the dining-room it was perceived that he proceeded to find the messenger, and conduct him upstairs.

"Well, Nelly," said Marion, in a whisper, "what do you say now, is it so certain that it was Lord Culduff you saw this morning?"

"I don't know what to make of it. I was fully as sure as Jack was."

"I'll wager he's been offered Paris," said Temple, gravely.

"Offered Paris?" cried Jack; "what do you mean?"

"I mean the embassy, of course," replied he, contemptuously. "Without," added he, "they want him in the Cabinet."

"And is it really by men like this the country is governed?" said Nelly, with a boldness that seemed the impulse of indignation.

"I'm afraid so," said Marion, scornfully. "Mr. Canning and Lord Palmerston were men very like this—were they not, Temple?"

"Precisely; Lord Culduff is exactly of the same order, however humble the estimate Ellen may form of such people."

"I'm all impatience for the news," said Augustus. "I wish Cutbill would come down at once."

"I'll take the odds that he goes to F. O.," said Temple.

"What the deuce could he do in China?" cried Jack, whose ear had led him into a cruel blunder.

Temple scarcely smiled at what savoured of actual irreverence, and added, "If so, I'll ask to be made private secretary."

"Mr. Temple, sir, his lordship would be glad to see you upstairs for a moment," said a footman, entering. And Temple arose and left the room, with a pride that might have accompanied him if summoned to a cabinet council.

"More mysteries of State," cried Jack. "I declare, girls, the atmosphere of political greatness is almost suffocating me. I wonder how Cutty stands it!"

A general move into the drawing-room followed this speech, and as Jack sauntered in he slipped his arm within Nelly's and led her towards a window. "I can't bear this any longer, Nelly—I must trip my anchor and move away. I'd as soon be lieutenant to a port admiral as live here. You're all grown too fine for me."

"That's not it at all, Jack," said she, smiling. "I see how you've been trying to bully yourself by bullying us this hour back; but it will be all right to-morrow. We'll go over to the cottage after breakfast."

"You may; *I'll* not, I promise you," said he, blushing deeply.

"Yes, you will, my dear Jack," said she, coaxingly; "and you'll be the first to laugh at your own foolish jealousy besides—if Julia is not too angry with you to make laughing possible."

"She may be angry or pleased, it's all one to me now," said he, passionately. "When I told her she was a coquette, I didn't believe it; but, by Jove, she has converted me to the opinion pretty quickly."

"You're a naughty boy, and you're in a bad humour, and I'll say no more to you now."

"Say it now, I advise you, if you mean to say it," said he, shortly; but she laughed at his serious face, and turned away without speaking.

"Isn't the cabinet council sitting late?" asked Augustus

of Marion. "They have been nigh two hours in conference."

"I take it it must be something of importance," replied she.

"Isn't Cutbill in it?" asked Augustus, mockingly.

"I saw Mr. Cutbill go down the avenue, with his cigar in his mouth, just after we came into the drawing-room."

"I'll go and try to pump him," said Jack. "One might do a grand thing on the Stock Exchange if he could get at State secrets like these." And as Jack went out a silence fell over the party, only broken by the heavy breathing of Colonel Bramleigh as he slept behind his newspaper. At last the door opened gently, and Temple moved quietly across the room, and tapping his father on the shoulder, whispered something in his ear. "What—eh?" cried Colonel Bramleigh, waking up. "Did you say 'out'?" Another whisper ensued, and the Colonel arose and left the room, followed by Temple.

"Isn't Temple supremely diplomatic to-night?" said Nelly.

"I'm certain he is behaving with every becoming reserve and decorum," said Marion, in a tone of severe rebuke.

When Colonel Bramleigh entered the library, Temple closed and locked the door, and in a voice of some emotion said, "Poor Lord Culduff; it's a dreadful blow. I don't know how he'll bear up against it."

"I don't understand it," said Bramleigh, peevishly. "What's this about a change of Ministry and a dissolution? Did you tell me the Parliament was dissolved?"

"No, sir. I said that a dissolution was probable. The Ministry have been sorely pressed in the Lords about Culduff's appointment, and a motion to address the Crown to cancel it has only been met by a majority of three. So small a victory amounts to a defeat, and the Premier writes to beg Lord Culduff will at once send in his resignation, as the only means to save the party."

"Well, if it's the only thing to do, why not do it?"

"Culduff takes a quite different view of it. He says that to retire is to abdicate his position in public life; that it was Lord Rigglesworth's duty to stand by a colleague to the last; that every Minister makes it a point of honour to defend a subordinate; and that——"

"I only half follow you. What was the ground of the attack? Had he fallen into any blunder—made any serious mistake?"

"Nothing of the kind, sir; they actually complimented his abilities, and spoke of his rare capacity. It was one of those bursts of hypocrisy we have every now and then in public life, to show the world how virtuous we are. They raked up an old story of thirty years ago of some elopement or other, and affected to see in this escapade a reason against his being employed to represent the Crown."

"I'm not surprised—not at all surprised. There is a strong moral feeling in the heart of the nation, that no man, however great his abilities, can outrage with impunity."

"If they dealt with him thus hardly in the Lords, we can fancy how he will be treated in the Lower House, where Rigby Norton has given notice of a motion respecting his appointment. As Lord Rigglesworth writes, 'R. N. has got up your whole biography, and is fully bent on making you the theme of one of his amusing scurrilities. Is it wise, is it safe to risk this? He'll not persevere—he could not persevere—in his motion, if you send in your resignation. We could not—at least so Gore, our whip, says—be sure of a majority were we to divide; and even a majority of, say thirty, to proclaim you moral, would only draw the whole press to open your entire life, and make the world ring with your, I suppose, very common and every-day iniquities.'"

"I declare I do not see what can be alleged against this advice. It seems to me most forcible and irrefragable."

"Very forcible, as regards the position of the Cabinet; but, as Lord Culduff says, ruin, positive ruin to him."

"Ruin of his own causing."

Temple shrugged his shoulders in a sort of contemptuous impatience; the sentiment was one not worth a reply.

"At all events, has he any other course open to him?"

"He thinks he has; at least, he thinks that, with your help and co-operation, there may be another course. The attack is to come from below the gangway on the Opposition side. It was to sit with these men you contested a county, and spent nigh twenty thousand pounds. You have great claims on the party. You know them all personally, and have much influence with them. Why, then, not employ it in his behalf?"

"To suppress the motion, you mean?"

Temple nodded.

"They'd not listen to it, not endure it for a moment. Norton wouldn't give up an attack for which he had pre-

pared himself, if he were to find out in the interval that the object of it was an angel. As I heard him say one day at 'the Reform,' 'Other men have their specialities. One fellow takes sugar, one the malt-duties, one Servia, or may be, Ireland; my line is a good smashing personality. Show me a fellow—of course I mean a political opponent—who has been giving himself airs as a colonial governor, or "swelling" it as a special envoy at a foreign court, and if I don't find something in his despatches to exhibit him as a false prophet, a dupe, or a blunderer, and if I can't make the House laugh at him, don't call me Rigby Norton.' He knows he does these things better than any man in England, and he does them in a spirit that never makes him an enemy."

"Culduff says that N. is terribly hard up. He was hit heavily at Goodwood, and asked for time to pay."

"Just what he has been doing for the last twenty years. There are scores of ships that no underwriters would accept making safe voyages half across the globe. No, no, he'll rub on for many a day, in the same fashion. Besides, if he shouldn't, what then?"

Temple made a significant gesture with his thumb in the palm of his hand.

"That's all your noble friend knows about England, then. See what comes of a man passing his life among foreigners. I suppose a Spanish or an Italian deputy mightn't give much trouble, nor oppose any strenuous resistance to such a dealing; but it won't do here—it will not."

"Lord Culduff knows the world as well as most men, sir."

"Yes, one world, I'm sure he does! A world of essenced old dandies and painted dowagers, surrounded by thieving lacqueys and cringing followers; where everything can be done by bribery, and nothing without it. But that's not England, I'm proud to say; nor will it be, I hope, for many a day to come."

"I wish, sir, you could be induced to give your aid to Culduff in this matter. I need not say what an influence it would exert over my own fortunes."

"You must win your way, Temple, by your own merits," said he, haughtily. "I'd be ashamed to think that a son of mine owed any share of his success in life to ignoble acts or backstairs influence. Go back and tell Lord Culduff from me, that so far as I know it, Lord Rigglesworth's advice is my own. No wise man ever courts a public scandal; and he

would be less than wise to confront one, with the certainty of being overwhelmed by it."

"Will you see him, sir? Will you speak to him yourself?"

"I'd rather not. It would be a needless pain to each of us."

"I suspect he means to leave this to-night."

"Not the worst thing he could do."

"But you'll see him, to say good-by?"

"Certainly; and all the more easily if we have no conversation in the meanwhile. Who's that knocking? Is the door locked?"

Temple hastened to open the door, and found Mr. Cutbill begging to have five minutes' conversation with Colonel Bramleigh.

"Leave us together, Temple, and tell Marion to send me in some tea. You'll have tea, too, won't you, Mr. Cutbill?"

"No, thank you; I'll ask for wine and water later. At present I want a little talk with you. Our noble friend has got it hot and heavy," said he, as Temple withdrew, leaving Bramleigh and himself together; "but it's nothing to what will come out when Norton brings it before the House. I suppose there hasn't been such a scandal for years as he'll make of it."

"I declare, Mr. Cutbill, as long as the gentleman continues my guest, I'd rather avoid than invite any discussion of his antecedents," said Bramleigh, pompously.

"All very fine, if you could stop the world from talking of them."

"My son has just been with me, and I have said to him, sir, as I have now repeated to you, that it is a theme I will not enter upon."

"You won't, won't you?"

"No, sir, I will not."

"The more fool you, then, that's all."

"What sir, am I to be told this to my face, under my own roof? Can you presume to address these words to me?"

"I meant nothing offensive. You needn't look like a turkey-cock. All the gobble-gobble in the world wouldn't frighten *me*. I came in here in a friendly spirit. I was handsomely treated in this house, and I'd like to make a return for it; that's why I'm here, Bramleigh."

"You will pardon me if I do not detect the friendliness you speak of in the words you have just uttered."

"Perhaps I was a little too blunt—a little too—what shall I call it?—abrupt; but what I wanted to say was this: here's the nicest opportunity in the world, not only to help a lame dog over the stile, but to make a good hound of him afterwards."

"I protest, sir, I cannot follow you. Your bluntness, as you call it, was at least intelligible."

"Don't be in a passion. Keep cool, and listen to me. If this motion is made about Culduff, and comes to a debate, there will be such stories told as would smash forty reputations. I'd like to see which of us would come well out of a biography, treated as a party attack in the House of Commons. At all events *he* couldn't face it. Stand by him, then, and get him through it. Have patience; just hear what I have to say. The thing can be done; there's eight days to come before it can be brought on. I know the money-lender has three of Norton's acceptances—for heavy sums, two of them. Do you see now what I'm driving at?"

"I may possibly see so much, sir, but I am unable to see why I should move in the matter."

"I'll show you, then. The noble Viscount is much smitten by a certain young lady upstairs, and intends to propose for her. Yes, I know it, and I'll vouch for it. Your eldest daughter may be a peeress, and though the husband isn't very young, neither is the title. I think he said he was the eighth lord—seventh or eighth, I'm not sure which—and taking the rank and the coal-mine together, don't you think she might do worse?"

"I will say, sir, that frankness like yours I've never met before."

"That's the very thing I'd like to hear you say of me. There's no quality I pride myself on so much as my candour."

"You have ample reason, sir."

"I feel it. I know it. Direct lines and a wide gauge—I mean in the way of liberality—that's my motto. I go straight to my terminus, wherever it is."

"It is not every man can make his profession the efficient ally of his morality."

"An engineer can, and there's nothing so like life as a new line of railroad. But to come back. You see now how the matter stands. If the arrangement suits you, the thing can be done."

"You have a very business-like way of treating these themes?"

"If I hadn't, I couldn't treat them at all. What I say to myself is, Will it pay? first of all, and secondly, How much will it pay? And that's the one test for everything. Have the divines a more telling argument against a life of worldliness and self-indulgence than when they ask, Will it pay? We contract for everything, even for going to heaven."

"If I could hope to rival your eminently practical spirit, Mr. Cutbill, I'd ask how far—to what extent—has Lord Culduff made you the confidant of his intentions?"

"You mean, has he sent me here this evening to make a proposal to you?"

"No, not exactly that; but has he intimated, has he declared—for intimation wouldn't suffice—has he declared his wish to be allied to my family?"

"He didn't say, 'Cutbill, go down and make a tender in my name for her,' if you mean that."

"I opine not, sir," said Bramleigh, haughtily.

"But when I tell you it's all right," said Cutbill, with one of his most knowing looks, "I think that ought to do."

"I take it, sir, that you mean courteously and fairly by me. I feel certain that you have neither the wish nor the intention to pain me, but I am forced to own that you import into questions of a delicate nature a spirit of commercial profit and loss, which makes all discussion of them harsh and disagreeable. This is not, let me observe to you, a matter of coal or a new cutting on a railroad."

"And are you going to tell Tom Cutbill that out of his own line of business—when he isn't up to his knees in earthworks, and boring a tunnel—that he's a fool and a nincompoop?"

"I should be sorry to express such a sentiment."

"Ay, or feel it; why don't you say that?"

"I will go even so far, sir, and say I should be sorry to feel it."

"That's enough. No offence meant, none is taken. Here's how it is now. Authorize me to see Joel about those bills of Norton's. Give me what the French call a *carte blanche* to negotiate, and I'll promise you I'll not throw your ten-pound notes away. Not that it need ever come to ten-pound notes, for Rigby does these things for the pure fun of them, and if any good fellow drops in on him of a morning, and says, 'Don't raise a hue and cry about that poor beggar,' or 'Don't push that fellow over the cliff,' he's just the man to say, 'Well, I'll not go on. I'll let it stand over,' or he'll even get

up and say, 'When I asked leave to put this question to the right honourable gentleman, I fully believed in the authentic character of the information in my possession. I have, however, since then discovered'—this, that, and the other. Don't you know how these things always finish? There's a great row, a great hubbub, and the man that retracts is always cheered by both sides of the House."

"Suppose, then, he withdraws his motion—what then? The discussion in the Lords remains on record, and the mischief, so far as Lord Culduff is concerned, is done."

"I know that. He'll not have his appointment; he'll take his pension and wait. What he says is this, 'There are only three diplomatists in all England, and short of a capital felony, any of the three may do anything. I have only to stand out and sulk,' says he, 'and they'll be on their knees to me yet.'"

"He yields, then, to a passing hurricane," said Bramleigh, pompously.

"Just so. He's taking shelter under an archway till he can call a hansom. Now you have the whole case; and as talking is dry work, might I ring for a glass of sherry and seltzer?"

"By all means. I am ashamed not to have thought of it before. This is a matter for much thought and deliberation," said Bramleigh, as the servant withdrew after bringing the wine. "It is too eventful a step to be taken suddenly."

"If not done promptly it can't be done at all. A week isn't a long time to go up to town and get though a very knotty negotiation. Joel isn't a common money-lender, like Drake or Downie. You can't go to his office except on formal business. If you want to do a thing in the way of accommodation with him, you'll have to take him down to the 'Ship,' and give him a nice little fish dinner, with the very best Sauterne you can find; and when you're sitting out on the balcony over the black mud—the favourite spot men smoke their cheroots in—then open your business; and though he knows well it was all 'a plant,' he'll not resent it, but take it kindly and well."

"I am certain that so nice a negotiation could not be in better hands than yours, Mr. Cutbill."

"Well, perhaps I might say without vanity, it might be in worse. So much for that part of the matter; now, as to the noble Viscount himself. I am speaking as a man of the

world to another man of the world, and speaking in confidence too. *You* don't join in that hypocritical cant against Culduff, because he had once in his life been what they call a man of gallantry? I mean, Bramleigh, that *you* don't go in for that outrageous humbug of spotless virtue, and the rest of it?"

Bramleigh smiled, and as he passed his hand over his mouth to hide a laugh, the twinkle of his eyes betrayed him.

"I believe I am old enough to know that one must take the world as it is pleased to present itself," said he, cautiously.

"And not want to think it better or worse than it really is?"

Bramleigh nodded assent.

"Now we understand each other, as I told you the other evening we were sure to do when we had seen more of each other. Culduff isn't a saint, but he's a Peer of Parliament; he isn't young, but he has an old title, and if I'm not much mistaken, he'll make a pot of money out of this mine. Such a man has only to go down into the Black Country or amongst the mills, to have his choice of some of the best-looking girls in England, with a quarter of a million of money; isn't that fact?"

"It is pretty like it."

"So that, on the whole, I'll say this is a good thing, Bramleigh—a right good thing. As Wishart said the other night in the House, 'A new country'—speaking of the States—'a new country wants alliances with old States;' so a new family wants connection with the old historic houses."

Colonel Bramleigh's face grew crimson, but he coughed to keep down his rising indignation, and slightly bowed his head.

"*You* know as well as *I* do, that the world has only two sorts of people, nobs and snobs; one has no choice—if you're not one, you must be the other."

"And yet, sir, men of mind and intellect have written about the untitled nobility of England."

"Silver without the hall-mark, Bramleigh, won't bring six shillings an ounce, just because nobody can say how far it's adulterated; it's the same with people."

"Your tact, sir, is on a par with your wisdom."

"And perhaps you haven't a high opinion of either," said

Cutbill, with a laugh that showed he felt no irritation whatever. "But look here, Bramleigh, this will never do. If there's nothing but blarney or banter between us we'll never come to business. If you agree to what I've been proposing —you have only *me* to deal with, the noble lord isn't in the game at all—he'll leave this to-night—it's right and proper he should; he'll go up to the mines for a few days, and amuse himself with quartz and red sandstone; and when I write or telegraph—most likely telegraph—'The thing is safe,' he'll come back here and make his proposal in all form."

"I am most willing to give my assistance to any project that may rescue Lord Culduff from this unpleasant predicament. Indeed, having myself experienced some of the persecution which political hatred can carry into private life, I feel a sort of common cause with him; but I protest at the same time—distinctly protest—against anything like a pledge as regards his lordship's views towards one of my family. I mean I give no promise."

"I see," said Cutbill, with a look of intense cunning. "You'll do the money part. Providence will take charge of the rest. Isn't that it?"

"Mr. Cutbill, you occasionally push my patience pretty hard. What I said, I said seriously and advisedly."

"Of course. Now then, give me a line to your banker to acknowledge my draft up to a certain limit, say five hnndred. I think five ought to do it."

"It's a smart sum, Mr. Cutbill."

"The article's cheap at the money. Well, well, I'll not anger you. Write me the order, and let me be off."

Bramleigh sat down at his table, and wrote off a short note to his junior partner in the bank, which he sealed and addressed, and handing it to Cutbill said, "This will credit you to the amount you spoke of. It will be advanced to you as a loan without interest, to be repaid within two years."

"All right; the thought of repayment will never spoil my night's rest. I only wish all my debts would give me as little trouble."

"You ought to have none, Mr. Cutbill; a man of your abilities, at the top of a great profession, and with a reputatation second to none, should, if he were commonly prudent, have ample means at his disposal."

"But that's the thing I am not, Bramleigh. I'm not one

of your safe fellows. I drive my engine at speed, even where the line is shaky and the rails ill-laid. Good bye; my respects to the ladies; tell Jack, if he's in town within a week, to look me up at 'Limmer's.'" He emptied the sherry into a tumbler as he spoke, drank it off, and left the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DEPARTURE.

Some days had gone over since the scene just recorded in our last chapter, and the house at Castello presented a very different aspect from its late show of movement and pleasure.

Lord Culduff, on the pretence of his presence being required at the mines, had left on the same night that Cutbill took his departure for England. On the morning after Jack also went away. He had passed the night writing and burning letters to Julia; for no sooner had he finished an epistle, than he found it too cruel, too unforgiving, too unfeeling, by half; and when he endeavoured to moderate his just anger, he discovered signs of tenderness in his reproaches that savoured of submission. It would not be quite fair to be severe on Jack's failures, trying as he was to do what has puzzled much wiser and craftier heads than his. To convey all the misery he felt at parting from her with a just measure of reproach for her levity towards him, to mete out his love and his anger in due doses, to say enough, but never too much, and finally to let her know that, though he went off in a huff, it was to carry her image in his heart through all his wanderings, never forgetting her for a moment, whether he was carrying despatches to Cadiz or coaling at Corfu—to do all these, I say, becomingly and well, was not an easy task, and especially for one who would rather have been sent to cut out a frigate under the guns of a fortress than indite a despatch to "my Lords of the Admiralty."

From the short sleep which followed all his abortive attempts at a letter he was awakened by his servant telling him it was time to dress and be off. Drearier moments there

are not in life than those which herald in a departure of a dark morning in winter, with the rain swooping in vast sheets against the window-panes, and the cold blast whistling through the leafless trees. Never do the candles seem to throw so little light as these do now through the dreary room, all littered and disordered by the preparations for the road. What fears and misgivings beset one at such a moment! What reluctance to go, and what a positive sense of fear one feels, as though the journey were a veritable leap in the dark, and that the whole fortunes of a life were dependent on that instant of resolution.

Poor Jack tried to battle with such thoughts as these by reminding himself of his duty and the calls of the service; he asked himself again and again, if it were out of such vacillating, wavering materials, a sailor's heart should be fashioned? was this the stuff that made Nelsons or Collingwoods? And though there was but little immediate prospect of a career of distinction, his sense of duty taught him to feel that the routine life of peace was a greater trial to a man's patience than all the turmoil and bustle of active service.

"The more I cling to remain here," muttered he, as he descended the stairs, "the more certain am I that it's pure weakness and folly."

"What's that you are muttering about weakness and folly, Jack?" said Nelly, who had got up to see him off, and give him the last kiss before he departed.

"How came it you are here, Nelly? Get back to your bed, girl, or you'll catch a terrible cold."

"No, no, Jack; I'm well shawled and muffled. I wanted to say good bye once more. Tell me what it was you were saying about weakness and folly."

"I was assuring myself that my reluctance to go away was nothing less than folly. I was trying to persuade myself that the best thing I could do was to be off; but I won't say I have succeeded."

"But it is, Jack; rely on it, it is. You are doing the right thing; and if I say so, it is with a heavy heart, for I shall be very lonely after you."

Passing his arm round her waist, he walked with her up and down the great spacious hall, their slow footsteps echoing in the silent house.

"If my last meeting with her had not been such as it was, Nelly," said he, falteringly; "if we had not parted in anger, I think I could go with a lighter heart."

"But don't you know Julia well enough to know that these little storms of temper pass away so rapidly that they never leave a trace behind them? She was angry, not because you found fault with her, but because she thought you had suffered yourself to be persuaded she was in the wrong."

"What do I care for these subtleties? She ought to have known that when a man loves a girl as I love her, he has a right to tell her frankly if there's anything in her manner he is dissatisfied with."

"He has no such right; and if he had, he ought to be very careful how he exercised it."

"And why so?"

"Just because fault-finding is not love-making."

"So that, no matter what he saw that he disliked or disapproved of, he ought to bear it all rather than risk the chance of his remonstrance being ill taken?"

"Not that, Jack; but he ought to take time and opportunity to make the same remonstrance. You don't go down to the girl you are in love with, and call her to account as you would summon a dockyardman or a rigger for something that was wrong with your frigate."

"Take an illustration from something you know better, Nelly, for I'd do nothing of the kind; but if I saw what, in the conduct or even in the manner of the girl I was in love with, I wouldn't stand if she were my wife, it will be hard to convince me that I oughtn't to tell her of it."

"As I said before, Jack, the telling is a matter of time and opportunity. Of all the jealousies in the world there is none as inconsiderate as that of lovers towards the outer world. Whatever change either may wish for in the other must never come suggested from without."

"And didn't I tell her she was wrong in supposing that it was Marion made me see her coquetry?"

"That you thought Marion had no influence over your judgment she might believe readily enough, but girls have a keener insight into each other than you are aware of, and she was annoyed—and she was right to be annoyed—that in your estimate of her there should enter anything, the very smallest, that could bespeak the sort of impression a woman might have conveyed."

"Nelly, all this is too deep for me. If Julia cared for me as I believe she had, she'd have taken what I said in good part. Didn't I give up smoking of a morning, except one solitary cheroot after breakfast, when she asked me? Who

ever saw me take a nip of brandy of a forenoon since that day she cried out, 'Shame, Jack, don't do that'? And do you think I wasn't as fond of my weed and my glass of schnapps as ever she was of all those little airs and graces she puts on to make fools of men?"

"Carriage waiting, sir," said a servant, entering with a mass of cloaks and rugs on his arm.

"Confound the carriage and the journey too," muttered he, below his breath. "Look here, Nelly, if you are right, and I hope with all my heart you are, I'll not go."

"That would be ruin, Jack; you must go."

"What do I care for the service? A good seaman—a fellow that knows how to handle a ship—need never want for employment. I'd just as soon be a skipper as wear a pair of swabs on my shoulders and be sworn at by some crusty old rear-admiral for a stain on my quarter-deck. I'll not go, Nelly; tell Ned to take off the trunks; I'll stay where I am."

"Oh, Jack, I implore you not to wreck your whole fortune in life. It is just because Julia loves you that you are bound to show yourself worthy of her. You know how lucky you were to get this chance. You said only yesterday it was the finest station in the whole world. Don't lose it, like a dear fellow—don't do what will be the embitterment of your entire life, the loss of your rank, and—the——" She stopped as she was about to add something still stronger.

"I'll go then, Nelly; don't cry about it; if you sob that way I'll make a fool of myself. Pretty sight for the flunkies, to see a sailor crying, wouldn't it? all because he had to join his ship. I'll go, then, at once. I suppose you'll see her to-day, or to-morrow at farthest?"

"I'm not sure, Jack. Marion said something about hunting parsons, I believe, which gave George such deep pain that he wouldn't come here on Wednesday. Julia appears to be more annoyed than George, and, in fact, for the moment, we have quarantined each other."

"Isn't this too bad?" cried he, passionately.

"Of course it is too bad; but it's only a passing cloud; and by the time I shall write to you it will have passed away."

Jack clasped her affectionately in his arms, kissed her twice, and sprang into the carriage, and drove away with a full heart indeed; but also with the fast assurance that his dear sister would watch over his interests and not forget him.

That dark drive went over like a hideous dream. He heard the wind and the rain, the tramp of the horses' feet and the splash of the wheels along the miry road, but he never fully realized where he was or how he came there. The first bell was ringing as he drove into the station, and there was but little time to get down his luggage and secure his ticket. He asked for a *coupé*, that he might be alone; and being known as one of the great family at Castello, the obsequious station-master hastened to install him at once. On opening the door, however, it was discovered that another traveller had already deposited a greatcoat and a rug in one corner.

"Give yourself no trouble, Captain Bramleigh," said the official, in a low voice. "I'll just say the *coupé* is reserved, and we'll put him into another compartment. Take these traps, Bob," cried he to a porter, "and put them into a first-class."

Scarcely was the order given when two figures, moving out of the dark, approached, and one, with a slightly foreign accent, but in admirable English, said, "What are you doing there? I have taken that place."

"Yes," cried his friend, "this gentleman secured the *coupé* on the moment of his arrival."

"Very sorry, sir—extremely sorry: but the *coupé* was reserved—specially reserved."

"My friend has paid for that place," said the last speaker; "and I can only say, if I were he, I'd not relinquish it."

"Don't bother yourself about it," whispered Jack. "Let him have his place. I'll take the other corner; and there's an end of it."

"If you'll allow me, Captain Bramleigh," said the official, who was now touched to the quick on that sore point, a question of his department—"if you'll allow me, I think I can soon settle this matter."

"But I will not allow you, sir," said Jack, his sense of fairness already outraged by the whole procedure. "He has as good a right to his place as I have to mine. Many thanks for your trouble. Good-bye." And so saying he stepped in.

The foreigner still lingered in earnest converse with his friend, and only mounted the steps as the train began to move. "A bientôt, cher Philippe," he cried, as the door was slammed, and the next instant they were gone.

The little incident which had preceded their departure had certainly not conduced to any amicable disposition between them, and each, after a sidelong glance at the other, en-

sconced himself more completely within his wrappings, and gave himself up to either silence or sleep.

Some thirty miles of the journey had rolled over, and it was now day—dark and dreary indeed—when Jack awoke and found the carriage pretty thick with smoke. There is a sort of freemasonry in the men of tobacco which never fails them, and they have a kind of instinctive guess of a stranger from the mere character of his weed. On the present occasion Jack recognized a most exquisite Havanna odour, and turned furtively to see the smoker.

"I ought to have asked," said the stranger, "if this was disagreeable to you, but you were asleep, and I did not like to disturb you."

"Not in the least, I am a smoker too," said Jack, as he drew forth his case and proceeded to strike a light.

"Might I offer you one of mine?—they are not bad," said the other, proffering his case.

"Thanks," said Jack; "my tastes are too vulgar for Cubans. Birdseye, dashed with strong Cavendish, is what I like."

"I have tried that too, as I have tried everything English, but the same sort of half success follows me through all."

"If your knowledge of the language be the measure, I'd say you've not much to complain of. I almost doubt whether you are a foreigner."

"I was born in Italy," said the other, cautiously, "and never in England till a few weeks ago."

"I'm afraid," said Jack, with a smile, "I did not impress you very favourably as regards British politeness, when we met this morning; but I was a little out of spirits. I was leaving home, not very likely to see it again for some time, and I wanted to be alone."

"I am greatly grieved not to have known this. I should never have thought of intruding."

"But there was no question of intruding. It was your right that you asserted, and no more."

"Half the harsh things that we see in life are done merely by asserting a right," said the other, in a deep and serious voice.

Jack had little taste for what took the form of a reflection; to his apprehension, it was own brother of a sermon; and warned by this sample of his companion's humour, he muttered a broken sort of assent and was silent. Little passed between them till they met at the dinner-table, and then they

only interchanged a few commonplace remarks. On their reaching their destination, they took leave of each other courteously, but half formally, and drove off their several ways.

Almost the first man, however, that Jack met, as he stepped on board the mail-packet for Holyhead, was his fellow-traveller of the rail. This time they met cordially, and after a few words of greeting they proceeded to walk the deck together like old acquaintances.

Though the night was fresh and sharp there was a bright moon, and they both felt reluctant to go below, where a vast crowd of passengers was assembled. The brisk exercise, the invigorating air, and a certain congeniality that each discovered in the other, soon established between them one of those confidences which are only possible in early life. Nor do I know anything better in youth than the frank readiness with which such friendships are made. It is with no spirit of calculation—it is with no counting of the cost, that we sign these contracts. We feel drawn into companionship, half by some void within ourselves, half by some quality that seems to supply that void. The tones of our own voice in our own ears assure us that we have found sympathy; for we feel that we are speaking in a way we could not speak to cold or uncongenial listeners.

When Jack Bramleigh had told that he was going to take command of a small gunboat in the Mediterranean, he could not help going further, and telling with what a heavy heart he was going to assume his command. "We sailors have a hard lot of it," said he; "we come home after a cruise—all is new, brilliant, and attractive to us. Our hearts are not steeled, as are landsmen's, by daily habit. We are intoxicated by what calmer heads scarcely feel excited. We fall in love, and then, some fine day, comes an Admiralty despatch ordering us to hunt slavers off Lagos, or fish for a lost cable in Behring's Straits."

"Never mind," said the other, "so long as there's a goal to reach, so long as there's a prize to win, all can be borne. It's only when life is a shoreless ocean—when, seek where you will, no land will come in sight—when, in fact, existence offers nothing to speculate on—then, indeed, the world is a dreary blank."

"I don't suppose any fellow's lot is as bad as that."

"Not perhaps completely, thoroughly so; but that a man's fate can approach such a condition—that a man can

cling to so small a hope that he is obliged to own to himself that it is next to no hope at all—that there could be, and is, such a lot in existence, I who speak to you now am able unfortunately to vouch for."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Jack, feelingly; "and I am sorry, besides, to have obtruded my own small griefs before one who has such a heavy affliction."

"Remember," said the Frenchman, "I never said it was all up with me. I have a plank still to cling to, though it be only a plank. My case is simply this: I have come over to this country to prefer a claim to a large property, and I have nothing to sustain it but my right. I know well you Englishmen have a theory that your laws are so admirably and so purely administered that if a man asks for justice—be he poor, or unknown, or a foreigner, it matters not—he is sure to obtain it. I like the theory, and I respect the man who believes in it, but I don't trust it myself. I remember reading in your debates, how the House of Lords sat for days over a claim of a French nobleman who had been ruined by the great Revolution in France, and for whose aid, with others, a large sum had once been voted, of which, through a series of misadventures, not a shilling had reached him. That man's claim, upheld and maintained by one of the first men in England, and with an eloquence that thrilled through every heart around, was rejected, ay, rejected, and he was sent out of court a beggar. They couldn't call him an impostor, but they left him to starve!" He paused for a second, and in a slower voice continued, "Now, it may be that my case shall one of these days be heard before that tribunal, and I ask you, does it not call for great courage and great trustfulness to have a hope on the issue?"

"I'll stake my head on it, they'll deal fairly by you," said Jack, stoutly.

"The poor baron I spoke of had powerful friends: men who liked him well, and fairly believed in his claim. Now I am utterly unknown, and as devoid of friends as of money. I think nineteen out of twenty Englishmen would call me an adventurer to-morrow; and there are few titles that convey less respect in this grand country of yours."

"There you are right; every one here must have a place in society, and be in it."

"My landlady where I lodged thought me an adventurer; the tailor who measured me whispered adventurer as he went downstairs; and when a cabman, in gratitude for an extra

sixpence, called me 'count,' it was to proclaim me an adventurer to all who heard him."

"You are scarcely fair to us," said Jack, laughing. "You have been singularly unlucky in your English acquaintance."

"No. I have met a great deal of kindness, but always after a certain interval of doubt—almost of mistrust. I tell you frankly, you are the very first Englishman with whom I have ventured to talk freely on so slight an acquaintance, and it has been to me an unspeakable relief to do it."

"I am proud to think you had that confidence in me."

"You yourself suggested it. You began to tell me of your plans and hopes, and I could not resist the temptation to follow you. A French hussar is about as outspoken an animal as an English sailor, so that we were well met."

"Are you still in the service?"

"No; I am in what we call *disponibilité*. I am free till called on—and free then if I feel unwilling to go back."

The Frenchman now passed on to speak of his life as a soldier—a career so full of strange adventures and curious incidents that Jack was actually grieved when they glided into the harbour of Holyhead, and the steamer's bell broke up the narrative.

CHAPTER XX.

A MORNING OF PERPLEXITIES.

Colonel Bramleigh turned over and over, without breaking the seal, a letter which, bearing the postmark of Rome and in a well-known hand, he knew came from Lady Augusta.

That second marriage of his had been a great mistake. None of the social advantages he had calculated on with such certainty had resulted from it. His wife's distinguished relatives had totally estranged themselves from her, as though she had made an unbecoming and unworthy alliance; his own sons and daughters had not concealed their animosity to their new stepmother; and, in fact, the best compromise the blunder admitted of was that they should try to see as little as possible of each other; and as they could not obliterate the compact, they should, as far as in them lay, endeavour to ignore it.

There are no more painful aids to a memory unwilling to be taxed than a banker's half-yearly statement; and in the long record which Christmas had summoned, and which now lay open before Bramleigh's eyes, were frequent and weighty reminders of Lady Augusta's expensive ways.

He had agreed to allow her a thousand napoleons—about eight hundred pounds—quarterly, which was, and which she owned was, a most liberal and sufficient sum to live on alone, and in a city comparatively cheap. He had, however, added, with a courtesy that the moment of parting might have suggested, "Whenever your tastes or your comforts are found to be hampered in any way by the limits I have set down, you will do me the favour to draw directly on 'the house,' and I will take care that your cheques shall be attended to."

The smile with which she thanked him was still in his memory. Since the memorable morning in Berkeley Square when she accepted his offer of marriage, he had seen nothing so fascinating—nor, let us add, so fleeting—as this gleam of enchantment. Very few days had sufficed to show him how much this meteor flash of loveliness had cost him: and now,

as he sat conning over a long line of figures, he bethought him that the second moment of witchery was very nearly as expensive as the first. When he made her that courteous offer of extending the limits of her civil list he had never contemplated how far she could have pushed his generosity, and now, to his amazement, he discovered that in a few months she had already drawn for seven thousand pounds, and had intimated to the house that the first instalment of the purchase-money of a villa would probably be required some time early in May; the business-like character of this "advice" being, however, sadly disparaged by her having totally forgotten to say anything as to the amount of the impending demand.

It was in a very unlucky moment—was there ever a lucky one?—when these heavy demands presented themselves. Colonel Bramleigh had latterly taken to what he thought, or at least meant to be, retrenchment. He was determined, as he said himself, to "take the bull by the horns:" but the men who perform this feat usually select a very small bull. He had nibbled, as it were, at the hem of the budget; he had cut down "the boys'" allowances. "What could Temple want with five hundred a year? Her Majesty gave him four, and her Majesty certainly never intended to take his services without fitting remuneration. As to Jack having three hundred, it was downright absurdity: it was extravagances like these destroyed the navy; besides, Jack had got his promotion, and his pay ought to be something handsome." With regard to Augustus, he only went so far as certain remonstrances about horse keep and some hints about the iniquities of a German valet who, it was rumoured, had actually bought a house in Duke Street, St. James's, out of his peculations in the family.

The girls were not extravagantly provided for, but for example's sake he reduced their allowance by one-third. Ireland was not a country for embroidered silks or Genoa velvet. It would be an admirable lesson to others if they were to see the young ladies of the great house dressed simply and unpretentiously. "These things could only be done by people of station. Such examples must proceed from those whose motives could not be questioned." He dismissed the head gardener, and he was actually contemplating the discharge of the French cook, though he well foresaw the storm of opposition so strong a measure was sure to evoke. When he came to sum up his reforms he was

shocked to find that the total only reached a little over twelve hundred pounds, and this in a household of many thousands.

Was not Castello, too, a mistake? Was not all this princely style of living, in a county without a neighbourhood, totally unvisited by strangers, a capital blunder? He had often heard of the cheapness of life in Ireland; and what a myth it was! He might have lived in Norfolk for what he was spending in Downshire, and though he meant to do great things for the country, a doubt was beginning to steal over him as to how they were to be done. He had often insisted that absenteeism was the bane of Ireland, and yet for the life of him he could not see how his residence there was to prove a blessing.

Lady Augusta, with her separate establishment, was spending above three thousand a year. Poor man, he was grumbling to himself over this, when that precious document from the bank arrived with the astounding news of her immense extravagance. He laid her letter down again; he had not temper to read it. It was so sure to be one of those frivolous little levities which jar so painfully on serious feelings. He knew so well the half-jestful excuses she would make for her wastefulness, the coquettish prettinesses she would deploy in describing her daily life of mock simplicity, and utter recklessness as to cost, that he muttered "Not now" to himself as he pushed the letter away. And as he did so he discovered a letter in the hand of Mr. Sedley, his law agent. He had himself written a short note to that gentleman, at Jack's request; for Jack—who, like all sailors, believed in a First Lord and implicitly felt that no promotion ever came rightfully—wanted a special introduction to the great men at Somerset House, a service which Sedley, who knew every one, could easily render him. This note of Sedley's then doubtless referred to that matter, and though Bramleigh did not feel any great or warm interest in the question, he broke the envelope to read it rather as a relief than otherwise. It was at least a new topic, and it could not be a very exciting one. The letter ran thus:—

"Tuesday, January 15.

"My Dear Sir,

"Hicklay will speak to the First Lord at the earliest convenient moment, but as Captain Bramleigh has just got his promotion, he does not see what can be done in addition.

I do not suppose your son would like a dockyard appointment, but a tolerably snug berth will soon be vacant at Malta, and as Captain B. will be in town to-morrow, I shall wait upon him early, and learn his wishes in the matter. There is a great talk to-day of changes in the Cabinet, and some rumour of a dissolution. These reports and disquieting news from France have brought the funds down one-sixth. Burrows and Black have failed—the Calcutta house had made some large tea speculation, it is said, without the knowledge of the partners here. At all events, the liabilities will exceed a million; available assets not a hundred thousand. I hope you will not suffer, or if so, to only a trifling extent, as I know you lately declined the advances Black so pressed upon you."

"He's right there," muttered Bramleigh. "I wouldn't touch those indigo bonds. When old Grant began to back up the natives, I saw what would become of the planters. All meddling with the labour market in India is mere gambling, and whenever a man makes his *coup* he ought to go off with his money. What's all this here," muttered he, "about Talookdars and Ryots? He ought to know this question cannot interest me."

"I met Kelson yesterday; he was very close and guarded, but my impression is that they are doing nothing in the affair of the 'Pretender.' I hinted jocularly something about having a few thousands by me if he should happen to know of a good investment, and, in the same careless way, he replied, 'I'll drop in some morning at the office, and have a talk with you.' There was a significance in his manner that gave me to believe he meant a 'transaction.' We shall see. I shall add a few lines to this after I have seen Captain B. to-morrow. I must now hurry off to Westminster."

Bramleigh turned over, and read the following:—

"Wednesday, 16.

"On going to the 'Drummond' this morning to breakfast, by appointment, with your son, I found him dressing, but talking with the occupant of a room on the opposite side of the sitting-room, where breakfast was laid for three. Captain B., who seemed in excellent health and spirits, entered freely on the subject of the shore appointment, and when I

suggested caution in discussing it, told me there was no need of reserve, that he could say what he pleased before his friend —whom, by the way,' said he, 'I am anxious to make know to you. You are the very man to give him first-rate advice, and if you cannot take up his case himself to recommend him to some one of trust and character.' While we were talking, the stranger entered—a young man, short, good-looking, and of good address. 'I want to present you to Mr. Sedley,' said Captain B., 'and I'll be shot if I don't forget your name.'

"'I half doubt if you ever knew it,' said the other, laughing; and, turning to me, added, 'Our friendship is of short date. We met as travellers, but I have seen enough of life to know that the instinct that draws men towards each other is no bad guarantee for mutual liking.' He said this with a slightly foreign accent, but fluently and easily.

"We now sat down to table, and though not being gifted with that expansiveness that the stranger spoke of, I soon found myself listening with pleasure to the conversation of a very shrewd and witty man, who had seen a good deal of life. Perhaps I may have exhibited some trait of the pleasure he afforded me—perhaps I may have expressed it in words; at all events your son marked the effect produced upon me, and in a tone of half jocular triumph, cried out, 'Eh, Sedley, you'll stand by him—won't you? I've told him if there was a man in England to carry him through a stiff campaign you were the fellow.' I replied by some common-place, and rose soon after to proceed to court. As the foreigner had also some business at the Hall, I offered him a seat in my cab. As we went along, he spoke freely of himself and his former life, and gave me his card, with the name 'Anatole Pracontal' —one of the aliases of our Pretender. So that here I was for two hours in close confab with the enemy, to whom I was actually presented by your own son! So overwhelming was this announcement that I really felt unable to take any course, and doubted whether I ought not at once to have told him who his fellow-traveller was. I decided at last for the more cautious line, and asked him to come and see me at Fulham. We parted excellent friends. Whether he will keep his appointment or not I am unable to guess. By a special good fortune—so I certainly must deem it—Captain Bramleigh was telegraphed for to Portsmouth, and had to leave town at once. So that any risks from that quarter are avoided. Whether this strange meeting will turn out well or ill, whether it will be misinterpreted by

Kelson when he comes to hear it—for it would be hard to believe it all accident—and induce him to treat us with distrust and suspicion, or whether it may conduce to a speedy settlement of everything, is more than I can yet say.

"I am so far favourably impressed by M. Pracontal's manner and address that I think he ought not to be one difficult to deal with. What may be his impression, however, when he learns with whom he has been talking so freely, is still doubtful to me. He cannot, it is true, mistrust your son, but he may feel grave doubts about *me*.

"I own I do not expect to see him to-morrow. Kelson will certainly advise him against such a step, nor do I yet perceive what immediate good would result from our meeting, beyond the assuring him—as I certainly should—that all that had occurred was pure chance, and that, though perfectly familiar with his name and his pretensions, I had not the vaguest suspicion of his identity till I read his card. It may be that out of this strange blunder good may come. Let us hope it. I will write to-morrow.

"Truly yours,

"M. Sedley."

Colonel Bramleigh re-read every line of the letter carefully; and as he laid it down with a sigh, he said, "What a complication of troubles on my hands. At the very moment that I am making engagements to relieve others, I may not have the means to meet my own difficulties. Sedley was quite wrong to make any advances to this man; they are sure to be misinterpreted. Kelson will think we are afraid, and raise his terms with us accordingly." Again his eyes fell upon Lady Augusta's letter; but he had no temper now to encounter all the light gossip and frivolity it was sure to contain. He placed it in his pocket, and set out to take a walk. He wanted to think, but he also wanted the spring and energy which come of brisk exercise. He felt his mind would work more freely when he was in motion; and in the open air, too, he should escape from the terrible oppression of being continually confronted by himself—which he felt while he was in the solitude of his study.

"If M. Pracontal measure us by the standard of Master Jack," muttered he, bitterly, "he will opine that the conflict ought not to be a tough one. What fools these sailors are when you take them off their own element; and what a little

bit of a world is the quarter-deck of a frigate! Providence has not blessed me with brilliant sons; that is certain. It was through Temple we have come to know Lord Culduff; and I protest I anticipate little of either profit or pleasure from the acquaintanceship. As for Augustus, he is only so much shrewder than the others, that he is more cautious; his selfishness is immensely preservative." This was not, it must be owned, a flattering estimate that he made of his sons; but he was a man to tell hard truths to himself; and to tell them roughly and roundly too, like one who, when he had to meet a difficulty in life, would rather confront it in its boldest shape.

So essentially realistic was the man's mind, that, till he had actually under his eyes these few lines describing Pracontal's look and manner, he had never been able to convince himself that this pretender was an actual *bonâ fide* creature. Up to this, the claim had been a vague menace, and no more; a tradition that ended in a threat! There was the whole of it! Kelson had written to Sedley, and Sedley to Kelson. There had been a half-amicable contest, a sort of round with the gloves, in which these two crafty men appeared rather like great moralists than cunning lawyers. Had they been peace-makers by Act of Parliament, they could not have urged more strenuously the advantages of amity and kindliness; how severely they censured the contentious spirit which drove men into litigation! and how beautifully they showed the Christian benefit of an arbitration "under the court," the costs to be equitably divided!

Throughout the whole drama, however, M. Pracontal had never figured as an active character of the piece; and for all that Bramleigh could see, the machinery might work to the end, and the catastrophe be announced, not only without ever producing him, but actually without his having ever existed. If from time to time he might chance to read in the public papers of a suspicious foreigner, a "Frenchman or Italian of fashionable appearance," having done this, that, or t'other, he would ask himself at once, "I wonder could that be *my* man? Is that the adventurer who wants to replace me here?" As time, however, rolled on, and nothing came out of this claim more palpable than a dropping letter from Sedley, to say he had submitted such a point to counsel, or he thought that the enemy seemed disposed to come to terms, Bramleigh actually began to regard the whole subject as a man might the danger of a storm, which, breaking afar off, might probably waste all its fury before it reached him.

Now, however, these feelings of vague, undefined doubt were to give way to a very papable terror. His own son had seen Pracontal, and sat at table with him. Pracontal was a good-looking, well-mannered fellow, with, doubtless, all the readiness and the aplomb of a clever foreigner; not a creature of mean appearance and poverty-struck aspect, whose very person would disparage his pretensions, but a man with the bearing of the world and the habits of society.

So sudden and so complete was this revulsion, and so positively did it depict before him an actual conflict, that he could only think of how to deal with Pracontal personally, by what steps it might be safest to approach him, and how to treat a man whose changeful fortunes must doubtless have made him expert in difficulties, and at the same time a not unlikely dupe to well-devised and well-applied flatteries.

To have invited him frankly to Castello—to have assumed that it was a case in which a generous spirit might deal far more successfully than all the cavils and cranks of the law, was Bramleigh's first thought; but to do this with effect, he must confide the whole story of the peril to some at least of the family: and this, for many reasons, he could not stoop to. Bramleigh certainly attached no actual weight to this man's claim—he did not in his heart believe that there was any foundation for his pretension; but Sedley had told him that there was case enough to go to a jury—and a jury meant exposure, publicity, comment, and very unpleasant comment too, when party hatred should contribute its venom to the discussion. If, then, he shrunk from imparting this story to his sons and daughters, how long could he count on secrecy?—only till next assizes perhaps. At the first notice of trial the whole mischief would be out, and the matter be a world-wide scandal. Sedley advised a compromise, but the time was very unpropitious for this. It was downright impossible to get money at the moment. Every one was bent on "realizing," in presence of all the crashes and bankruptcies around. None would lend on the best securities, and men were selling out at ruinous loss to meet pressing engagements. For the very first time in his life, Bramleigh felt what it was to want for ready money. He had every imaginable kind of wealth. Houses and lands, stocks, shares, ships, costly deposits and mortgages—everything in short but gold: and yet it was gold alone could meet the emergency. How foolish it was of him to involve himself

in Lord Culduff's difficulties at such a crisis: had he not troubles enough of his own! Would that essenced and enamelled old dandy have stained his boots to have served *him?* That was a very unpleasant query, which would cross his mind, and never obtain anything like a satisfactory reply. Would not his calculation probably be that Bramleigh was amply recompensed for all he could do by the honour of being deemed the friend of a noble lord, so highly placed, and so much thought of in the world.

As for Lady Augusta's extravagance, it was simply insufferable. He had been most liberal to her because he would not permit that whatever might be the nature of the differences that separated them, money in any shape should enter. There must be nothing sordid or mean in the tone of any discussion between them. She might prefer Italy to Ireland; sunshine to rain, a society of idle, leisure-loving, indolent, soft-voiced men, to association with sterner, severer, and more energetic natures. She might affect to think climate all essential to her: and the society of her sister a positive necessity. All these he might submit to, but he was neither prepared to be ruined by her wastefulness, nor maintain a controversy as to the sum she should spend. "If we come to figures, it must be a fight," muttered he, "and an ignoble fight too; and it is to that we are now approaching."

"I think I can guess what is before me here," said he, with a grim smile, as he tore open the letter and prepared to read it. Now, though on this occasion his guess was not exactly correct, nor did the epistle contain the graceful little nothings by which her ladyship was wont to chronicle her daily life, we forbear to give it in extenso to our readers; first of all, because it opened with a very long and intricate explanation of motives which was no explanation at all, and then proceeded by an equally prolix narrative to announce a determination which was only to be final on approval. In two words, Lady Augusta was desirous of changing her religion; but before becoming a Catholic, she wished to know if Colonel Bramleigh would make a full and irrevocable settlement on her of her present allowance, giving her entire power over its ultimate disposal, for she hinted that the sum might be capitalized; the recompense for such splendid generosity being the noble consciousness of a very grand action, and his own liberty. To the latter she adverted with becoming delicacy, slyly hinting that in the church to which he belonged there might probably be no very strenuous

objections made, should he desire to contract new ties, and once more re-enter the bonds of matrimony.

The expression which burst aloud from Bramleigh as he finished the letter, conveyed all that he felt on the subject.

"What outrageous effrontery! The first part of this precious document is written by a priest, and the second by an attorney. It begins by informing me that I am a heretic, and politely asks me to add to that distinction the honour of being a beggar. What a woman! I have done, I suppose, a great many foolish things in life, but I shall not cap them so far, I promise you, Lady Augusta, by an endowment of the Catholic Church. No, my lady, you shall give the new faith you are about to adopt the most signal proof of your sincerity, by renouncing all worldliness at the threshold; and as the nuns cut off their silken tresses, you shall rid yourself of that wealth which we are told is such a barrier against heaven. Far be it from me," said he with a sardonic bitterness, "who have done so little for your happiness here, to peril your welfare hereafter."

"I will answer this at once," said he. "It shall not remain one post without its reply."

He arose to return to the house; but in his pre-occupation he continued to walk till he reached the brow of the cliff from which the roof of the curate's cottage was seen, about a mile off. The peaceful stillness of the scene, where not a leaf moved, and where the sea washed lazily along the low strand with a sweeping motion that gave no sound, calmed and soothed him. Was it not to taste that sweet sense of repose that he had quitted the busy life of cities and come to this lone sequestered spot? Was not this very moment, as he now felt it, the realization of a long-cherished desire? Had the world anything better in all its prizes, he asked himself, than the peaceful enjoyment of an unchequered existence? Shall I not try to carry out what once I had planned to myself, and live my life as I intended?"

He sat down on the brow of the crag and looked out over the sea. A gentle, but not unpleasant sadness was creeping over him. It was one of those moments—every man has had them—in which the vanity of life and the frivolity of all its ambitions present themselves to the mind far more forcibly than ever they appear when urged from the pulpit. There is no pathos, no bad taste, no inflated description in the workings of reflectiveness. When we come to compute with

ourselves what we have gained by our worldly successes, and to make a total of all our triumphs, we arrive at a truer insight into the nothingness of what we are contending for than we ever attain through the teaching of our professional moralists.

Colonel Bramleigh had made considerable progress along this peaceful track since he sat down there. Could he only be sure to accept the truths he had been repeating to himself without any wavering or uncertainty; could he have resolution enough to conform his life to these convictions—throw over all ambitions, and be satisfied with mere happiness—was this prize not within his reach? Temple and Marion, perhaps, might resist; but he was certain the others would agree with him. While he thus pondered, he heard the low murmur of voices, apparently near him; he listened, and perceived that some persons were talking as they mounted the zigzag path which led up from the bottom of the gorge, and which had to cross and re-cross continually before it gained the summit. A thick hedge of laurel and arbutus fenced the path on either side so completely as to shut out all view of those who were walking along it, and who had to pass and re-pass quite close to where Bramleigh was sitting.

To his intense astonishment it was in French they spoke: and a certain sense of terror came over him as to what this might portend. Were these spies of the enemy, and was the mine about to be sprung beneath him? One was a female voice, a clear distinct voice—which he thought he knew well, and oh, what inexpressible relief to his anxiety was it when he recognized it to be Julia L'Estrange's. She spoke volubly, almost flippantly, and, as it seemed to Bramleigh, in a tone of half sarcastic raillery, against which her companion appeared to protest, as he more than once repeated the word "*sérieuse*" in a tone almost reproachful.

"If I am to be serious, my lord," said she, in a more collected tone, "I had better get back to English. Let me tell you then, in a language which admits of little misconception, that I have forborne to treat your lordship's proposal with gravity, partly out of respect for myself, partly out of deference to you."

"Deference to me? What do you mean? what can you mean?"

"I mean, my lord, that all the flattery of being the object

of your lordship's choice could not obliterate my sense of a disparity, just as great between us in years as in condition. I was nineteen my last birthday, Lord Culduff;" and she said this with a pouting air of offended dignity.

"A peeress of nineteen would be a great success at a drawing-room," said he, with a tone of pompous deliberation.

"Pray, my lord, let us quit a theme we cannot agree upon. With all your lordship's delicacy, you have not been able to conceal the vast sacrifices it has cost you to make me your present proposal. I have no such tact. I have not even the shadow of it; and I could never hope to hide what it would cost me to become *grande dame*."

"A proposal of marriage; an actual proposal," muttered Bramleigh, as he arose to move away. "I heard it with my own ears; and heard her refuse it, besides."

An hour later, when he mounted the steps of the chief entrance, he met Marion, who came towards him with an open letter. "This is from poor Lord Culduff," said she; "he has been stopping these last three days at the L'Estranges,' and what between boredom and bad cookery he couldn't hold out any longer. He begs he may be permitted to come back here; he says 'Put me below the salt, if you like—anywhere, only let it be beneath your roof, and within the circle of your fascinating society.' Shall I say Come, papa?"

"I suppose we must," muttered Bramleigh, sulkily, and passed on to his room.

CHAPTER XXI.

GEORGE AND JULIA.

It was after a hard day with the hounds that George L'Estrange reached the cottage to a late dinner. The hunting had not been good. They had found three times, but each time lost their fox after a short burst, and though the morning broke favourably, with a low cloudy sky and all the signs of a good scenting day, towards the afternoon a brisk north-easter had sprung up, making the air sharp and piercing, and rendering the dogs wild and uncertain. In fact, it was one of those days which occasionally irritate men more than actual "blanks;" there was a constant promise of something, always ending in disappointment. The horses, too, were fretful and impatient, as horses are wont to be with frequent checks, and when excited by a cold and cutting wind.

Even Nora, perfection that she was of temper and training, had not behaved well. She had taken her fences hotly, and impatiently, and actually chested a stiff bank, which cost herself and her rider a heavy fall, and a disgrace that the curate felt more acutely than the injury.

"You don't mean to say you fell, George?" said Julia, with a look of positive incredulity.

"Nora did, which comes pretty much to the same thing. We were coming out of Gore's Wood, and I was leading. There's a high bank with a drop into Longworth's lawn. It's a place I have taken scores of times. One can't fly it; you must 'top,' and Nora can do that sort of thing to perfection; and as I came on I had to swerve a little to avoid some of the dogs that were climbing up the bank. Perhaps it was that irritated her, but she rushed madly on, and came full chest against the gripe, and —— I don't remember much more till I found myself actually drenched with vinegar that old Catty Lalor was pouring over me, when I got up again, addled and confused enough, but I'm all right now. Do you know, Ju," said he, after a pause, "I was

more annoyed by a chance remark I heard as I was lying on the grass than by the whole misadventure?"

"What was it, George?"

"It was old Curtis was riding by, and he cried out, 'Who's down?' and some one said, 'L'Estrange.' 'By Jove,' said he, 'I don't think that fellow was ever on his knees before;' and this because I was a parson."

"How unfeeling; but how like him!"

"Wasn't it? After all, it comes of doing what is not exactly right. I suppose it's not enough that I see nothing wrong in a day with the hounds. I ought to think how others regard it; whether it shocks *them*, or exposes my cloth to sarcasm or censure? Is it not dinner-hour?"

"Of course it is, George. It's past eight."

"And where's our illustrious guest; has he not appeared?"

"Lord Culduff has gone. There came a note to him from Castello in the afternoon, and about five o'clock the phaeton appeared at the door—only with the servants—and his lordship took a most affectionate leave of me, charging me with the very sweetest messages for you, and assurances of eternal memory of the blissful hours he had passed here."

"Perhaps it's not the right thing to say, but I own to you I'm glad he's gone."

"But why, George; was he not amusing?"

"Yes; I suppose he was; but he was so supremely arrogant, so impressed with his own grandness, and our littleness, so persistently eager to show us that we were enjoying an honour in his presence, that nothing in our lives could entitle us to, that I found my patience pushed very hard to endure it."

"I liked him. I liked his vanity and conceit; and I wouldn't for anything he had been less pretentious."

"I have none of your humoristic temperament, Julia, and I never could derive amusement from the eccentricities or peculiarities of others."

"And there's no fun like it, George. Once that you come to look on life as a great drama, and all the men and women as players, it's the best comedy ever one sat at."

"I'm glad he's gone for another reason, too. I suppose it's shabby to say it, but it's true all the same: he was a very costly guest, and I wasn't disposed, like Charles the Bold or that other famous fellow, to sell a province to entertain an emperor."

"Had we a province to sell, George?" said she, laughing.

"No; but I had a horse, and unfortunately Nora must go to the hammer now."

"Surely not for this week's extravagance?" cried she, anxiously.

"Not exactly for this, but for everything. You know old Curtis's saying, 'It's always the last glass of wine makes a man tipsy.' But here comes the dinner, and let us turn to something pleasanter."

It was so jolly to be alone again, all restraint removed, all terror of culinary mishaps withdrawn, and all the consciousness of little domestic shortcomings obliterated, that L'Estrange's spirit rose at every moment, and at last he burst out, "I declare to you, Julia, if that man hadn't gone, I'd have died out of pure inanition. To see him day after day trying to conform to our humble fare, turning over his meat on his plate, and trying to divide with his fork the cutlet that he wouldn't condescend to cut, and barely able to suppress the shudder our little light wine gave him; to witness all this, and to feel that I mustn't seem to know, while I was fully aware of it, was a downright misery. I'd like to know what brought him here."

"I fancy he couldn't tell you himself. He paid an interminable visit, and we asked him to stop and dine with us. A wet night detained him, and when his servant came over with his dressing-bag or portmanteau, you said, or I said—I forget which—that he ought not to leave us without a peep at our coast scenery."

"I remember all that; but what I meant was, that his coming here from Castello was no accident. He never left a French cook and Château Lafitte for cold mutton and sour sherry without some reason for it."

"You forget, George, he was on his way to Lisconnor when he came here. He was going to visit the mines."

"By the by, that reminds me of a letter I got this evening. I put it in my pocket without reading. Isn't that Vickars' hand?"

"Yes; it is his reply, perhaps, to my letter. He is too correct and too prudent to write to myself, and sends the answer to you."

"As our distinguished guest is not here to be shocked, Julia, let us hear what Vickars says."

"'My dear Mr. L'Estrange, I have before me a letter from your sister, expressing a wish that I should consent to the withdrawal of the sum of two thousand pounds, now vested

in consols under my trusteeship, and employ these moneys in a certain enterprise which she designates as the coal-mines of Lisconnor. Before acceding to the grave responsibility which this change of investment would impose upon me, even supposing that the Master'—who is the Master, George?"

"Go on; read further," said he, curtly.

"'——that the Master would concur with such a procedure, I am desirous of hearing what you yourself know of the speculation in question. Have you seen and conversed with the engineers who have made the surveys? Have you heard from competent and unconcerned parties——?' Oh, George, it's so like the way he talks. I can't read on."

L'Estrange took the letter from her and glanced rapidly over the lines, and then turning to the last page read aloud: "'How will the recommendation of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners affect you touching the union of Portshandon with Kilmullock? Do they simply extinguish you, or have you a claim for compensation?'"

"What does he mean, George?" cried she, as she, gazed at the pale face and agitated expression of her brother as he laid down the letter before her.

"It is just extinguishment; that's the word for it," muttered he. "When they unite the parishes, they suppress me."

"Oh, George, don't say that; it has not surely come to this?"

"There's no help for it," said he, putting away his glass and leaning his head on his hand. "I was often told they'd do something like this; and when Grimsby was here to examine the books and make notes—you remember it was a wet Sunday, and nobody came but the clerk's mother—he said, as we left the church, 'The congregation is orderly and attentive, but not numerous.'"

"I told you, George, I detested that man. I said at the time he was no friend to *you*."

"If he felt it his duty——"

"Duty indeed! I never heard of a cruelty yet that hadn't the plea of a duty. I'm sure Captain Craufurd comes to church, and Mrs. Bayley comes, and as to the great house, there's a family there of not less than thirty persons."

"When Grimsby was here Castello was not occupied."

"Well, it is occupied now; and if Colonel Bramleigh be a person of the influence he assumes to be, and if he cares—as I take it he must care—not to live like a heathen, he'll pre-

vent this cruel wrong. I'm not sure that Nelly has much weight, but she would do anything in the world for us, and I think Augustus, too, would befriend us."

"What can they all do? It's a question for the Commissioners."

"So it may; but I take it the Commissioners are human beings."

He turned again to the letter which lay open on the table, and read aloud, "'They want a chaplain, I see, at Albano near Rome. Do you know any one who could assist you to the appointment?—always providing that you would like it.' I should think I would like it."

"You were thinking of the glorious riding over the Campagna, George, that you told me about long ago?'"

"I hope not," said he, blushing deeply, and looked overwhelmed with confusion.

"Well, *I* was, George. Albano reminded me at once of those long moonlight canters you told me about, with the grand old city in the distance. I almost fancy I have seen it all. Let us bethink us of the great people we know, and who would aid us in the matter."

"The list begins and ends with the Lord Culduff, I suspect."

"Not at all. It is the Bramleighs can be of use here. Lady Augusta lives at Rome; she must be, I'm sure, a person of influence there, and be well known too, and know all the English of station. It's a downright piece of good fortune for us she should be there. There now, be of good heart, and don't look wretched. We'll drive over to Castello to-morrow."

"They've been very cool towards us of late."

"As much our fault as theirs, George; some, certainly, was my own."

"Oh, Vickars has heard of her. He says here, 'Is the Lady Augusta Bramleigh, who has a villa at Albano, any relative of your neighbour Colonel Bramleigh? She is very eccentric, some say mad: but she does what she likes with every one. Try and procure a letter to her.'"

"It's all as well as settled, George. We'll be cantering over that swelling prairie before the spring ends," said she. Quietly rising and going over to the piano, she began one of those little popular Italian ballads which they call "Stornelli"—those light effusions of national life which blend up love and flowers and sunshine together so pleasantly, and seem to emblematize the people who sing them.

"Thither! oh, thither! George! as the girl sings in Goethe's ballad. Won't it be delightful?"

"First let us see if it be possible."

And then they began one of those discussions of ways and means which, however, as we grow old in life, are tinged with all the hard and stern characters of sordid self-interest, are in our younger days blended so thoroughly with hope and trustfulness that they are amongst the most attractive of all the themes we can turn to. There were so many things to be done, and so little to do them with, that it was marvellous to hear of the cunning and ingenious devices by which poverty was to be cheated out of its meanness and actually imagine itself picturesque. George was not a very imaginative creature, but it was strange to see to what flights he rose as the sportive fancy of the high-spirited girl carried him away to the region of the speculative and the hopeful.

"It's just as well, after all, perhaps," said he, after some moments of thought, "that we had not invested your money in the mine."

"Of course, George, we shall want it to buy vines and orange-trees. Oh, I shall grow mad with impatience if I talk of this much longer! Do you know," said she, in a more collected and serious tone, "I have just built a little villa on the lake-side of Albano? And I'm doubting whether I'll have my 'pergolato' of vines next to the water or facing the mountain. I incline to the mountain."

"We mustn't dream of building," said he, gravely.

"We must dream of everything, George. It is in dreamland I am going to live. Why is this gift of fancy bestowed upon us if not to conjure up allies that will help us to fight the stern evils of life? Without imagination, hope is a poor, weary, plodding foot-traveller, painfully lagging behind us. Give him but speculation, and he soars aloft on wings and rises towards heaven."

"Do be reasonable, Julia; and let us decide what steps we shall take."

"Let me just finish my boat-house: I'm putting an aviary on the top of it. Well, don't look so pitifully; I am not going mad. Now, then, for the practical. We are to go over to Castello to-morrow early, I suppose?"

"Yes; I should say in the morning, before Colonel Bramleigh goes into his study. After that he dislikes being disturbed. I mean to speak to him myself. You must address yourself to Marion."

"The forlorn hope always falls to my share," said she, poutingly.

"Why, you were the best friends in the world till a few days back!"

"You men can understand nothing of these things. You neither know the nice conditions nor the delicate reserves of young lady friendships; nor have you the slightest conception of how boundless we can be in admiration of each other in the imagined consciousness of something very superior in ourselves, and which makes all our love a very generous impulse. There is so much coarseness in male friendships, that you understand none of these subtle distinctions."

"I was going to say, thank Heaven we don't."

"You are grateful for very little, George. I assure you there is a great charm in these fine affinities, and remember you men are not necessarily always rivals. Your roads in life are so numerous and so varied, that you need not jostle. We women have but one path, and one goal at the end of it; and there is no small generosity in the kindliness we extend to each other."

They talked away late into the night of the future. Once or twice the thought flashed across Julia whether she ought not to tell of what had passed between Lord Culduff and herself. She was not quite sure but that George ought to hear it; but then a sense of delicacy restrained her—a delicacy that extended to that old man who had made her the offer of his hand, and who would not for worlds have it known that his offer had been rejected. "No," thought she, "his secret shall be respected. As he deemed me worthy to be his wife, he shall know that so far as regards respect for his feelings he had not over-estimated me."

It was all essential, however, that her brother should not think of enlisting Lord Culduff in his cause, or asking his lordship's aid or influence in any way; and when L'Estrange carelessly said, "Could not our distinguished friend and guest be of use here?" she hastened to reply, "Do not think of that, George. These men are so victimized by appeals of this sort that they either flatly refuse their assistance, or give some flippant promise of an aid they never think of according. It would actually fret me if I thought we were to owe anything to such intervention. In fact," said she, laughingly, "it's quite an honour to be his acquaintance. It would be something very like a humiliation to have him for

a friend. And now good-night. You won't believe it, perhaps; but it wants but a few minutes to two o'clock."

"People, I believe, never go to bed in Italy," said he, yawning; "or only in the day-time. So that we are in training already, Julia."

"How I hope the match may come off," said she, as she gave him her hand at parting. "I'll go and dream over it."

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE LIBRARY AT CASTELLO.

When L'Estrange and his sister arrived at Castello on the morning after the scene of our last chapter, it was to discover that the family had gone off early to visit the mine of Lisconnor, where they were to dine, and not return till late in the evening.

Colonel Bramleigh alone remained behind: a number of important letters which had come by that morning's post detained him; but he had pledged himself to follow the party, and join them at dinner, if he could finish his correspondence in time.

George and Julia turned away from the door, and were slowly retracing their road homeward, when a servant came running after them to say that Colonel Bramleigh begged Mr. L'Estrange would come back for a moment; that he had something of consequence to say to him.

"I'll stroll about the shrubberies, George, till you join me," said Julia. "Who knows it may not be a farewell look I may be taking of these dear old scenes."

George nodded, half mournfully, and followed the servant towards the library.

In his ordinary and every-day look, no man ever seemed a more perfect representative of worldly success and prosperity than Colonel Bramleigh. He was personally what would be called handsome, had a high bold forehead, and large grey eyes, well set and shaded by strong full eyebrows, so regular in outline and so correctly defined as to give a half-suspicion that art had been called to the assistance of nature. He

was ruddy and fresh-looking, with an erect carriage, and that air of general confidence that seemed to declare he knew himself to be a favourite of fortune and gloried in the distinction.

"I can do scores of things others must not venture upon," was a common saying of his. "I can trust to my luck," was almost a maxim with him. And in reality, if the boast was somewhat vainglorious, it was not without foundation: a marvellous, almost unerring, success attended him through life. Enterprises that were menaced with ruin and bankruptcy would rally from the hour that he joined them, and schemes of fortune that men deemed half desperate would, under his guidance, grow into safe and profitable speculations. Others might equal him in intelligence, in skill, in ready resource, and sudden expedient, but he had not one to rival him in luck. It is strange enough that the hard business mind, the men of realism *par excellence*, can recognize such a thing as fortune; but so it is, there are none so prone to believe in this quality as the people of finance. The spirit of the gambler is, in fact, the spirit of commercial enterprise, and the "odds" are as carefully calculated in the counting-house as in the betting-ring. Seen as he came into the breakfast-room of a morning, with the fresh flush of exercise on his cheek, or as he appeared in the drawing-room before dinner, with that air of ease and enjoyment that marked all his courtesy, one would have said, "There is one certainly with whom the world goes well. There were caustic, invidious people, who hinted that Bramleigh deserved but little credit for that happy equanimity and that buoyant spirit which sustained him: they said, "He has never had a reverse, wait till he be tried:" and the world had waited and waited, and to all seeming the evenful hour had not come, for there he was, a little balder perhaps, a stray grey hair in his whiskers, and somewhat portlier in his presence, but, on the whole, pretty much what men had known him to be for fifteen or twenty years back.

Upon none did the well-to-do, blooming, and prosperous rich man produce a more powerful impression than on the young curate, who, young, vigorous, handsome as he was, could yet never sufficiently emerge from the *res angustæ domi* to feel the ease and confidence that come of affluence.

What a shock was it then to L'Estrange, as he entered the library, to see the man whom he had ever beheld as the type of all that was happy and healthful and prosperous,

haggard and careworn, his hand tremulous, and his manner abrupt and uncertain, with a certain furtive dread at moments, followed by outbursts of passionate defiance, as though he were addressing himself to others besides him who was then before him.

Though on terms of cordial intimacy with the curate, and always accustomed to call him by his name, he received him as he entered the room with a cold and formal politeness, apologized for having taken the liberty to send after and recall him, and ceremoniously requested him to be seated.

"We were sorry you and Miss L'Estrange could not join the pic-nic to-day," said Bramleigh; "though to be sure it is scarcely the season yet for such diversions."

L'Estrange felt the awkwardness of saying that they had not been invited, and muttered something not very intelligible about the uncertainty of the weather.

"I meant to have gone over myself," said Bramleigh, hurriedly; "but all these," and he swept his hand as he spoke through a mass of letters on the table, "all these have come since morning, and I am not half through them yet. What's that the moralist says about calling no man happy till he dies? I often think one cannot speculate upon a pleasant day till after the post-hour."

"I know very little of either the pains or pleasures of the letter-bag. I have almost no correspondence."

"How I envy you!" cried he, fervently.

"I don't imagine that mine is a lot many would be found to envy," said L'Estrange, with a gentle smile.

"The old story, of course. 'Quî fit, Mæcenas, ut Nemo'—I forget my Horace—'ut Nemo;' how does it go?"

"Yes, sir. But I never said I was discontented with my lot in my life. I only remarked that I didn't think that others would envy it."

"I have it—I have it," continued Bramleigh, following out his own train of thought; "I have it. 'Ut Nemo, quam sibi sortem sit contentus.' It's a matter of thirty odd years since I saw that passage, L'Estrange, and I can't imagine what could have brought it so forcibly before me to-day."

"Certainly it could not have been any application to yourself," said the curate, politely.

"How do you mean, sir?" cried Bramleigh, almost fiercely. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that few men have less cause for discontent with fortune?"

"How can *you*—how can any man, presume to say that of another!" said Bramleigh, in a loud and defiant tone, as he arose and paced the room. "Who can tell what passes in his neighbour's house, still less in his heart or his head? What do I know, as I listen to your discourse on a Sunday, of the terrible conflict of doubts that have beset you during the week—heresies that have swarmed around you like the vipers and hideous reptiles that gathered around St. Anthony, and that, banished in one shape, came back in another? How do I know what compromises you may have made with your conscience before you come to utter to me your eternal truths; and how you may have said, 'If he can believe all this, so much the better for him'—eh?"

He turned fiercely round, as if to demand an answer, and the curate modestly said, "I hope it is not so that men preach the gospel."

"And yet many must preach in that fashion," said Bramleigh, with a deep but subdued earnestness. "I take it that no man's convictions are without a flaw somewhere, and it is not by parading that flaw he will make converts."

L'Estrange did not feel disposed to follow him into this thesis, and sat silent and motionless.

"I suppose," muttered Bramleigh, as he folded his arms and walked the room with slow steps, "it's all expediency—all! We do the best we can, and hope it may be enough. You are a good man, L'Estrange——"

"Far from it, sir. I feel, and feel very bitterly too, my own unworthiness," said the curate, with an intense sincerity of voice.

"I think you so far good that you are not worldly. You would not do a mean thing, an ignoble, a dishonest thing; you wouldn't take what was not your own, nor defraud another of what was his—would you?"

"Perhaps not; I hope not."

"And yet that is saying a great deal. I may have my doubts whether that penknife be mine or not. Some one may come to-morrow or next day to claim it as his, and describe it, Heaven knows how rightly or wrongly. No matter, he'll say he owns it. Would you, sir—I ask you now simply as a Christian man, I am not speaking to a casuist or a lawyer—would you, sir, at once, just as a measure of peace to your own conscience, say, 'Let him take,' rather than burden your heart with a discussion for which you had no temper nor taste? That's the question I'd like to ask you. Can

you answer it? I see you cannot," cried he, rapidly. "I see at once how you want to go off into a thousand subtleties, and instead of resolving my one doubt, surround me with a legion of others."

"If I know anything about myself I'm not much of a casuist; I haven't the brains for it," said L'Estrange, with a sad smile.

"Ay, there it is. That's the humility of Satan's own making; that's the humility that exclaims, 'I'm only honest. I'm no genius. Heaven has not made me great or gifted. I'm simply a poor creature, right-minded and pure-hearted.' As if there was anything—as if there could be anything so exalted as this same purity."

"But I never said that; I never presumed to say so," said the other, modestly.

"And if you rail against riches, and tell me that wealth is a snare and a pitfall, what do you mean by telling me that my reverse of fortune is a chastisement? Why, sir, by your own theory it ought to be a blessing, a positive blessing; so that if I were turned out of this princely house to-morrow, branded as a pretender and an impostor, I should go forth better—not only better, but happier. Ay, that's the point; happier than I ever was as the lord of these broad acres!" As he spoke he tore his cravat from his throat, as though it were strangling him by its pressure, and now walked the room, carrying the neckcloth in his hand, while the veins in his throat stood out full and swollen like a tangled cordage.

L'Estrange was so much frightened by the wild voice and wilder gesture of the man, that he could not utter a word in reply.

Bramleigh now came over, and leaning his hand on the other's shoulder, in a tone of kind and gentle meaning, said,—

"It is not your fault, my dear friend, that you are illogical and unreasonable. You are obliged to defend a thesis you do not understand, by arguments you cannot measure. The armoury of the Church has not a weapon that has not figured in the middle ages; and what are you to do with halberds and cross-bows in a time of rifles and revolvers! If a man, like myself, burdened with a heavy weight on his heart, had gone to his confessor in olden times, he would probably have heard, if not words of comfort, something to enlighten, to instruct, and to guide him. Now what can you give me? tell me that? I want to hear by what subtleties the Church

can reconcile me not to do what I ought to do, and yet not quarrel with my own conscience. Can you help me to that?"

L'Estrange shook his head in dissent.

"I suppose it is out of some such troubles as mine that men come to change their religion." He paused; and then bursting into a laugh, said—"You hear that the other bank deals more liberally—asks a smaller commission, and gives you a handsomer interest—and you accordingly transfer your account. I believe that's the whole of it."

"I will not say you have stated the case fairly," said L'Estrange; but so faintly as to show that he was far from eager to continue the discussion, and he arose to take his leave.

"You are going already? and I have not spoken to you one word about—what was it? Can you remember what it was? Something that related personally to yourself."

"Perhaps I can guess, sir. It was the mine at Lisconnor, probably? You were kind enough the other day to arrange my securing some shares in the undertaking, Since that, however, I have heard a piece of news which may affect my whole future career. There has been some report made by the Commissioner about the parish."

"That's it, that's it. They're going to send you off, L'Estrange. They're going to draft you to a cathedral, and make a prebendary of you. You are to be on the staff of an archbishop: a sort of Christian unattached. Do you like the prospect?"

"Not at all, sir. To begin, I am a very poor man, and could ill bear the cost of life this might entail."

"Your sister would probably be pleased with the change; a gayer place, more life, more movement."

"I suspect my sister reconciles herself to dulness even better than myself."

"Girls do that occasionally; patience is a female virtue."

There was a slight pause; and now L'Estrange, drawing a long breath, as if preparing himself for a great effort, said,—

"It was to speak to you, sir, about that very matter, and to ask your assistance, that I came up here this day."

"I wish I were a bishop, for your sake, my dear friend."

"I know well, sir, I can count upon your kind interest in me, and I believe that an opportunity now offers——"

"What is it? where is it?"

"At Rome, sir; or rather near Rome, a place called Albano. They want a chaplain there."

"But you're not a Catholic priest, L'Estrange."

"No, sir. It is an English community that wants a parson."

"I see; and you think this would suit you?"

"There are some great attractions about it; the country, the climate, and the sort of life, all have a certain fascination for me, and Julia is most eager about it."

"The young lady has ambition," muttered Bramleigh to himself. "But what can *I* do, L'Estrange? I don't own a rood of land at Albano. I haven't a villa—not even a fig-tree there. I could subscribe to the church fund, if there be such a thing; I could qualify for the franchise, and give you a vote, if that would be of service."

"You could do better, sir. You could give me a letter to Lady Augusta, whose influence, I believe, is all powerful."

For a moment Bramleigh stared at him fixedly, and then sinking slowly into a chair, he leaned his head on his hand, and seemed lost in thought. The name of Lady Augusta had brought up before him a long train of events and possible consequences, which soon led him far away from the parson and all his cares. From her debts, her extravagances, her change of religion, and her suggestion of separation, he went back to his marriage with her, and even to his first meeting. Strange chain of disasters from beginning to end. A bad investment in every way. It paid nothing. It led to nothing.

"I hope, sir," said L'Estrange, as he gazed at the strange expression of preoccupation in the other's face—"I hope, sir, I have not been indiscreet in my request?"

"What *was* your request?" asked Colonel Bramleigh, bluntly, and with a look of almost sternness.

"I had asked you, sir, for a letter to Lady Augusta," said the curate, half offended at the manner of the last question.

"A letter to Lady Augusta?" repeated Bramleigh, dwelling on each word, as though by the effort he could recall to his mind something that had escaped him.

"I mean, sir, with reference to this appointment—the chaplaincy," interposed L'Estrange, for he was offended at the hesitation, which he thought implied reluctance or disinclination on Colonel Bramleigh's part, and he hastened to show that it was not any claim he was preferring to her ladyship's acquaintance, but simply his desire to obtain her interest in his behalf.

"Influence! influence!" repeated Bramleigh to himself. "I have no doubt she has influence, such persons generally have. It is one of the baits that catch them! This little glimpse of power has a marvellous attraction—and these churchmen know so well how to display all their seductive arts before the eager eyes of the newly won convert. Yes, I am sure you are right, sir; Lady Augusta is one most likely to have influence—you shall have the letter you wish for. I do not say I will write it to-day, for I have a heavy press of correspondence before me, but if you will come up to-morrow, by luncheon time, or to dinner—why not dine here?"

"I think I'd rather come up early, sir."

"Well, then, early be it. I'll have the letter for you. I wish I could remember something I know I had to say to you. What was it? What was it? Nothing of much consequence, perhaps, but still I feel as if—eh—don't you feel so too?"

"I have not the slightest clue, sir, to what you mean."

"It wasn't about the mine—no. I think you see your way *there* clearly enough. It may be a good thing, or it may not. Cutbill is like the rest of them, not a greater rogue perhaps, nor need he be. They *are* such shrewd fellows, and as the money is your sister's—trust money, too—I declare I'd be cautious."

L'Estrange mumbled some words of assent; he saw that Bramleigh's manner betokened exhaustion and weariness, and he was eager to be gone. "Till to-morrow, then, sir," said, he moving to the door.

"You'll not dine with us? I think you might though," muttered Bramleigh, half to himself. "I'm sure Culduff would make no show of awkwardness, nor would your sister either—women never do. But do just what you like; my head is aching so, I believe I must lie down for an hour or two. Do you pass Belton's?"

"I could without any inconvenience; do you want him?"

"I fancy I'd do well to see him; he said something of cupping me the last day he was here—would you mind telling him to give me a call?"

"May I come up in the evening, sir, and see how you are?"

"In the evening? this evening?" cried Bramleigh, in a harsh discordant voice. "Why, good heavens, sir! have a little, a very little discretion. You have been here since

eleven; I marked the clock. It was not full five minutes after eleven, when you came in—it's now past one. Two mortal hours — and you ask me if you may return this evening; and I reply, sir, distinctly—No! Is that intelligible? I say no!" As he spoke he turned away, and the curate, covered with shame and confusion, hastened out of the room, and down the stairs, and out into the open air, dreading lest he should meet any one, and actually terrified at the thought of being seen. He plunged into the thickest of the shrubberies, and it was with a sense of relief he heard from a child that his sister had gone home some time before, and left word for him to follow her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CURATE CROSS-EXAMINED.

When the party returned from the picnic, it was to find Colonel Bramleigh very ill. Some sort of fit the doctor called it—not apoplexy nor epilepsy, but something that seemed to combine features of both. It had, he thought, been produced by a shock of some sort, and L'Estrange, who had last been with him before his seizure, was summoned to impart the condition in which he had found him, and whatever might serve to throw light on the attack.

If the curate was nervous and excited by the tidings that reached him of the Colonel's state, the examination to which he was submitted served little to restore calm to his system. Question after question poured in. Sometimes two or three would speak together, and all—except Ellen—accosted him in a tone that seemed half to make him chargeable with the whole calamity. When asked to tell of what they had been conversing, and that he mentioned how Colonel Bramleigh had adverted to matters of faith and belief, Marion, in a whisper loud enough to be overheard, exclaimed, "I was sure of it. It was one of those priestly indiscretions; he would come talking to papa about what he calls his soul's health, and in this way brought on the excitement."

"Did you not perceive, sir," asked she, fiercely, "that the topic was too much for his nerves? Did it not occur to you that the moment was inopportune for a very exciting subject?"

"Was his manner easy and natural when you saw him first?" asked Augustus.

"Had he been reading that debate on Servia?" inquired Temple.

"Matter enough there, by Jove, to send the blood to a man's head," cried Culduff, warmly.

"I'm convinced it was all religious," chimed in Marion, who triumphed mercilessly over the poor parson's confusion. "It is what they call 'in season and out of season:' and they are true to their device, for no men on earth more heartily defy the dictates of tact or delicacy."

"Oh, Marion, what are you saying?" whispered Nelly.

"It's no time for honeyed words, Ellen, in the presence of a heavy calamity, but I'd like to ask Mr. L'Estrange why, when he saw the danger of the theme they were discussing, he did not try to change the topic."

"So I did. I led him to talk of myself and my interests."

"An admirable antidote to excitement, certainly," muttered Culduff to Temple, who seemed to relish the joke intensely.

"You say that my father had been reading his letters—did he appear to have received any tidings to call for unusual anxiety?" asked Augustus.

"I found him—as I thought—looking very ill, careworn almost, when I entered. He had been writing, and seemed fatigued and exhausted. His first remark to me was, I remember, a mistake." L'Estrange, here stopped suddenly. He did not desire to repeat the speech about being invited to the picnic. It would have been an awkwardness on all sides.

"What do you call a mistake, sir?" asked Marion, calmly.

"I mean he asked me something which a clearer memory would have reminded him not to have inquired after."

"This grows interesting. Perhaps you will enlighten us a little farther, and say what the blunder was."

"Well, he asked me how it happened that Julia and myself were not of the picnic, forgetting of course that we—we had not heard of it." A deep flush was now spread over his face and forehead, and he looked overwhelmed with shame.

"I see it all; I see the whole thing," said Marion, triumphantly. "It was out of the worldliness of the picnic sprung all the saintly conversation that ensued."

"No; the transition was more gradual," said L'Estrange, smiling, for he was at last amused at the asperity of this cross-examination. "Nor was there what you call any saintly conversation at all. A few remarks Colonel Bramleigh indeed made on the insufficiency of, not the Church, but churchmen, to resolve doubts and difficulties."

"I heartily agree with him," broke in Lord Culduff, with a smile of much intended significance.

"And is it possible; are we to believe that all papa's attack was brought on by a talk over a picnic?" asked Marion.

"I think I told you that he received many letters by the

post, and to some of them he adverted as being very important and requiring immediate attention. One that came from Rome appeared to cause him much excitement."

Marion turned away her head with an impatient toss, as though she certainly was not going to accept this explanation as sufficient.

"I shall want a few minutes with Mr. L'Estrange alone in the library, if I may be permitted," said the doctor, who had now entered the room after his visit to the sick man.

"I hope you may be more successful than we have been," whispered Marion, as she sailed out of the room, followed by Lord Culduff; and after a few words with Augustus, the doctor and L'Estrange retired to confer in the library.

"Don't flurry me; take me quietly, doctor," said the curate, with a piteous smile. "They've given me such a burster over the deep ground that I'm completely blown. Do you know," added he, seriously, "they've cross-questioned me in a way that would imply that I am the cause of this sudden seizure?"

"No, no; they couldn't mean that."

"There's no excuse then for the things Miss Bramleigh said to me."

"Remember what an anxious moment it is; people don't measure their expressions when they are frightened. When they left him in the morning he was in his usual health and spirits, and they come back to find him very ill—dangerously ill. That alone would serve to palliate any unusual show of eagerness. Tell me now, was he looking perfectly himself, was he in his ordinary spirits, when you met him?"

"No; I thought him depressed, and at times irritable."

"I see; he was hasty and abrupt. He did not brook contradiction, perhaps?"

"I never went that far. If I dissented once or twice, I did so mildly and even doubtingly."

"Which made him more exacting and more intolerant, you would say?"

"Possibly it did. I remember he rated me rather sharply for not being contented with a very humble condition in life, though I assured him I felt no impatience at my lowly state, and was quite satisfied to wait till better should befall me. He called me a casuist for saying this, and hinted that all churchmen had the leaven of the Jesuit in them; but he got out of this after a while, and promised to write a letter in my behalf."

"And which he told me you would find sealed and addressed on this table here. Here it is."

"How kind of him to remember me through all his suffering."

"He said something about it being the only reparation he could make you, but his voice was not very clear or distinct, and I couldn't be sure I caught his words correctly."

"Reparation! he owed me none."

"Well, well, it is possible I may have mistaken him. One thing is plain enough; you cannot give me any clue to this seizure beyond the guess that it may have been some tidings he received by post."

L'Estrange shook his head in silence, and after a moment said, "Is the attack serious?"

"Highly so."

"And is his life in danger?"

"A few hours will decide that, but it may be days before we shall know if his mind will recover. Craythorpe has been sent for from Dublin, and we shall have his opinion this evening. I have no hesitation in saying that mine is unfavourable."

"What a dreadful thing, and how fearfully sudden. I cannot conceive how he could have bethought him of the letter for me at such a moment."

"He wrote it, he said, as you left him; you had not quitted the house when he began. He said to me, 'I saw I was growing worse, I felt my confusion was gaining on me, and a strange commixture of people and events was occurring in my head; so I swept all my letters and papers into a drawer and locked it, wrote the few lines I had promised, and with my almost last effort of consciousness rang the bell for my servant.'"

"But he was quite collected when he told you this?"

"Yes, it was in one of those lucid intervals when the mind shines out clear and brilliant; but the effort cost him dearly: he has not rallied from it since."

"Has he over-worked himself; is this the effect of an over-exerted brain?"

"I'd call it rather the result of some wounded sensibility; he appears to have suffered some great reverse in ambition or in fortune. His tone, so far as I can fathom it, implies intense depression. After all, we must say he met much coldness here: the people did not visit him, there was no courtesy, no kindliness, shown him; and though he seemed indifferent to it, who knows how he may have felt it?"

"I do not suspect he gave any encouragement to intimacy; he seemed to me as if declining acquaintance with the neighbourhood."

"Aye; but it was in resentment, I opine; but *you* ought to know best. You were constantly here?"

"Yes, very frequently; but I am not an observant person; all the little details which convey a whole narrative to others are utterly lost upon *me*."

The doctor smiled. It was an expression that appeared to say he concurred in the curate's version of his own nature.

"It is these small gifts of combining, arranging, sifting, and testing, that we doctors have to cultivate," said he, as he took his hat. "The patient the most eager to be exact and truthful will, in spite of himself, mislead and misguide us. There is a strange bend sinister in human nature, against sincerity, that will indulge itself even at the cost of life itself. You are the physician of the soul, sir; but take my word for it, you might get many a shrewd hint and many a useful suggestion from us, the meaner workmen who only deal with nerves and arteries."

As he wended his solitary road homewards, L'Estrange pondered thoughtfully over the doctor's words. He had no need, he well knew, to be reminded of his ignorance of mankind; but here was a new view of it, and it seemed immeasurable.

On the whole he was a sadder man than usual on that day. The world around him—that narrow circle whose diameter was perhaps a dozen miles or so—was very sombre in its colouring. He had left sickness and sorrow in a house where he had hitherto only seen festivity and pleasure; and worse again, as regarded himself, he had carried away none of those kindlier sympathies and friendly feelings which were wont to greet him at the great house. Were they really then changed to him? and if so, why so? There is a moral chill in the sense of estrangement from those we have lived with on terms of friendship that, like the shudder that precedes ague, seems to threaten that worse will follow. Julia would see where the mischief lay had she been in his place. Julia would have read the mystery, if there were a mystery, from end to end; but *he*, he felt it, he had no powers of observation, no quickness, no tact; he saw nothing that lay beneath the surface, nor, indeed, much that was on the surface. All that he knew was, that at the moment when his future was more uncertain than ever, he found himself more isolated

and friendless than ever he remembered to have been. The only set-off against all this sense of desertion was the letter which Colonel Bramleigh had written in his behalf, and which he had remembered to write as he lay suffering on his sick bed. He had told the doctor where to find it, and said it lay sealed and directed. The address was there, but no seal. It was placed in an open envelope, on which was written "Favoured by the Rev. G. L'Estrange." Was the omission of the seal accident or intention? Most probably accident, because he spoke of having sealed it. And yet that might have been a mere phrase to imply that the letter was finished. Such letters were probably in most cases either open, or only closed after being read by him who bore them. Julia would know this. Julia would be able to clear up this point, thought he, as he pondered and plodded homeward.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DOUBTS AND FEARS.

"And here is the letter, Julia," said L'Estrange, as they sat at tea together that same evening. "Here is the letter; and if I were as clever a casuist as Colonel Bramleigh thought me, I should perhaps know whether I have the right to read it or not."

"Once I have begun to discuss such a point, I distrust my judgment; but when I pronounce promptly, suddenly, out of mere woman's instinct, I have great faith in myself."

"And how does your woman's instinct incline here?"

"Not to read it. It may or may not have been the writer's intention to have sealed it; the omission was possibly a mere accident. At all events, to have shown you the contents would have been a courtesy at the writer's option. He was not so inclined——"

"Stop a bit, Julia," cried he, laughing. "Here you are arguing the case, after having given me the instinctive impulse that would not wait for logic. Now, I'll not stand 'floggee and preachee' too."

"Don't you see, sir," said she, with a mock air of being offended, "that the very essence of this female instinct is its being the perception of an inspired process of reasoning, an instinctive sense of right, that did not require a mental effort to arrive at?"

"And this instinctive sense of right says, Don't read?"

"Exactly so."

"Well, I don't agree with you," said he, with a sigh, "I don't know, and I want to know, in what light Colonel Bramleigh puts me forward. Am I a friend? am I a dependent? am I a man worth taking some trouble about? or am I merely, as I overheard him saying to Lord Culduff, 'a young fellow my boys are very fond of?'"

"Oh, George. You never told me this."

"Because it's not safe to tell you anything. You are sure to resent things you ought never to show you have known. I'd lay my life on it that had you heard that speech, you'd

have contrived to introduce it into some narrative or some description before a week went over."

"Well, it's a rule of war, if the enemy fire unfair ammunition, you may send it back to him."

"And then," said L'Estrange, reverting to his own channel of thought, "and then it's not impossible that it might be such a letter as I would not have stooped to present."

"If I were a man, nothing would induce me to accept a letter of introduction to any one," said she, boldly. "It puts every one concerned in a false position. 'Give the bearer ten pounds' is intelligible; but when the request is, 'Be polite to the gentleman who shall deliver this; invite him to dine; present him to your wife and daughters; give him currency amongst your friends;' all because of certain qualities which have met favour with some one else; why, this subverts every principle of social intercourse; this strikes at the root of all that lends a charm to intimacy. *I* want to find out the people who suit me in life, just as I want to display the traits that may attract others to *me*."

"I'd like to know what's inside this," said L'Estrange, who only half followed what she was saying.

"Shall I tell you?" said she, gravely.

"Do, if you can."

"Here it is: 'The bearer of this is a young fellow who has been our parson for some time back, and now wants to be yours at Albano. There's not much harm in him; he is well-born, well-mannered, preaches but twelve minutes, and rides admirably to hounds. Do what you can for him; and believe me yours truly."

"If I thought——"

"Of course you'd put it in the fire," said she, finishing his speech; "and I'd have put it there though it should contain something exactly the reverse of all this."

"The doctor told me that Bramleigh said something about a reparation that he owed me; and although the phrase, coming from a man in his state, might mean nothing, or next to nothing, it still keeps recurring to my mind, and suggesting an eager desire to know what he could point to."

"Perhaps his conscience pricked him, George, for not having made more of you while here. I'd almost say it might with some justice."

"I think they have shown us great attention—have been most hospitable and courteous to us."

"I'm not a fair witness, for I have no sort of gratitude for

social civilities. I think it's always the host is the obliged person."

"I know you do," said he, smiling.

"Who knows," said she, warmly, "if he has not found out that the 'young fellow the boys were so fond of,' was worthy of favour in higher quarters? Eh, George, might not this give the clue to the reparation he speaks of?"

"I can make nothing of it," said he, as he tossed the letter on the table with an impatient movement. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Julia," cried he, after a pause. "I'll take the letter over to Castello to-morrow, and ask Augustus if he feels at liberty to read it to me; if he opine not, I'll get him to seal it then and there."

"But suppose he consents to read it, and suppose it should contain something, I'll not say offensive, but something disagreeable, something that you certainly would not wish to have said; will you be satisfied at being the listener while he reads it?"

"I think I'd rather risk that than bear my present uncertainty."

"And if you'll let me, George, I'll go with you. I'll loiter about the grounds, and you can tell Nelly where to find me, if she wishes to see me."

"By the way, she asked me why you had not been to Castello; but my head being very full of other things, I forgot to tell you; and then there was something else I was to say."

"Try and remember it, George," said she, coaxingly.

"What was it? Was it? — no— it couldn't have been about Lord Culduff carrying away the doctor to his own room, and having him there full half an hour in consultation before he saw Colonel Bramleigh."

"Did he do that?"

"Yes. It was some redness, or some heat, or something or other that he remarked about his ears after eating. No, no; it wasn't that. I remember all about it now. It was a row that Jack got into with his Admiral; he didn't report himself, or he reported to the wrong man, or he went on board when he oughtn't; in fact, he did something irregular, and the Admiral used some very hard language, and Jack rejoined, and the upshot is he's to be brought before a court-martial; at least he fears so."

"Poor fellow; what is to become of him?"

"Nelly says that there is yet time to apologize; that

the Admiral will permit him to retract or recall what he said, and that his brother officers say he ought—some of them at least."

"And it was this you forgot to tell me?" said she, reproachfully.

"No. It was all in my head, but along with so many things; and then I was so badgered and bullied by the cross-examination they submitted me to; and so anxious and uneasy, that it escaped me till now."

"Oh, George, let us do a good-natured thing; let us go over and see Nelly; she'll have so many troubles on her heart, she'll want a word of advice and kindness. Let us walk over there now."

"It's past ten o'clock, Julia."

"Yes; but they're always late at Castello."

"And raining heavily besides;—listen to that!"

"What do we care for rain? did bad weather ever keep either of us at home when we wished to be abroad?"

"We can go to-morrow. I shall have to go to-morrow about this letter."

"But if we wait we shall lose a post. Come, George, get your coat and hat, and I'll be ready in an instant."

"After all, it will seem so strange in us presenting ourselves at such an hour, and in such a trim. I don't know how we shall do it."

"Easily enough. I'll go to Mrs. Eady the housekeeper's room, and you'll say nothing about me, except to Nelly; and as for yourself, it will be only a very natural anxiety on your part to learn how the Colonel is doing. There, now, don't delay. Let us be off at once."

"I declare I think it a very mad excursion, and the only thing certain to come of it will be a heavy cold or a fever."

"And we face the same risks every day for nothing. I'm sure wet weather never kept you from joining the hounds."

This home-thrust about the very point on which he was then smarting decided the matter, and he arose and left the room without a word.

"Yes," muttered he, as he mounted the stairs, "there it is! That's the reproach I can never make head against. The moment they say, 'You were out hunting,' I stand convicted at once."

There was little opportunity for talk as they breasted the beating rain on their way to Castello; great sheets of

water came down with a sweeping wind, which at times compelled them to halt and seek shelter ere they could recover breath to go on.

"What a night," muttered he. "I don't think I was ever out in a worse."

"Isn't it rare fun, George?" said she, laughingly. "It's as good as swimming in a rough sea."

"Which I always hated."

"And which I delighted in! Whatever taxes one's strength to its limits, and exacts all one's courage besides, is the most glorious of excitements. There's a splash; that was hail, George."

He muttered something that was lost in the noise of the storm; and though from time to time she tried to provoke him to speak, now by some lively taunt, now by some jesting remark on his sullen humour, he maintained his silence till he reached the terrace, when he said,—

"Here we are, and I declare, Julia, I'd rather go back than go forward."

"You shan't have the choice," said she, laughing, as she rang the bell. "How is your master, William?" asked she, as the servant admitted them.

"No better, miss; the Dublin doctor's upstairs now in consultation, and I believe there's another to be sent for."

"Mind that you don't say I'm here. I'm going to Mrs. Eady's room to dry my cloak, and I don't wish the young ladies to be disturbed," said she, passing hastily on to the housekeeper's room, while L'Estrange made his way to the drawing-room. The only person here, however, was Mr. Harding, who, with his hands behind his back and his head bowed forward, was slowly pacing the room in melancholy fashion.

"Brain fever, sir," muttered he, in reply to the curate's inquiry. "Brain fever, and of a severe kind. Too much application to business—did not give up in time, they say."

"But he looked so well; seemed always so hearty and so cheerful."

"Very true, sir, very true; but, as you told us on Sunday, in that impressive discourse of yours, we are only whited sepulchres."

L'Estrange blushed. It was so rare an event for him to be complimented on his talents as a preacher that he half mistrusted the eulogy.

"And what else, indeed, are we?" sighed the little man.

"Here's our dear friend, with all that the world calls prosperity; he has fortune, station, and fine family, and——"

The enumeration of the gifts that made up this lucky man's measure of prosperity was here interrupted by the entrance of Ellen Bramleigh, who came in abruptly and eagerly.

"Where's Julia?" cried she; "my maid told me she was here."

L'Estrange answered in a low tone. Ellen, in a subdued voice, said,—

"I'll take her up to my room. I have much to say to her. Will you let her remain here to-night?—you can't refuse. It is impossible she could go back in such weather." And without waiting for his reply, she hurried away.

"I suppose they sent for you, sir?" resumed Harding. "They wished you to see him?" and he made a slight gesture, to point out that he meant the sick man.

"No; I came up to see if I could say a few words to Augustus—on a matter purely my own."

"Ha! indeed! I'm afraid you are not likely to have the opportunity. This is a trying moment, sir. Dr. B., though only a country practitioner, is a man of much experience, and he opines that the membranes are affected."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; he thinks it's the membranes; and he derives his opinion from the nature of the mental disturbance, for there are distinct intervals of perfect sanity—indeed, of great mental power. The Colonel was a remarkable man, Mr. L'Estrange; a very remarkable man."

"I've always heard so."

"Ah, sir, he had great projects—I might call them grand projects, for Ireland, had he been spared to carry them out."

"Let us still hope that he may."

"No, no, sir, that is not to be; and if Belton be correct, it is as well, perhaps, it should not be." Here he touched his forehead with the top of his finger, and gave a glance of most significant meaning.

"Does he apprehend permanent injury to the brain?"

The other pursed his mouth, and shooked his head slowly, but did not speak.

"That's very dreadful," said L'Estrange, sadly.

"Indeed it is, sir; take this from us," and here he touched his head, "and what are we? What are we better than the

beasts of the field? But why do I say this to you, sir? Who knows these things better than yourself?"

The curate was half inclined to smile at the ambiguity of the speech, but he kept his gravity, and nodded assent.

"Nobody had the slightest conception of his wealth," said Harding, coming up, and actually whispering the words into the other's ear. "We knew all about the estated property; I did at least, I knew every acre of it, and how it was let; but of his money in shares, in foreign securities, on mortgages, and in various investments; what he had out at venture in Assam and Japan, and what he drew twenty-five per cent. from in Peru;—of these, sir, none of us had any conception; and would you believe it, Mr. L'Estrange, that he can talk of all these things at some moments as collectedly as if he was in perfect health? He was giving directions to Simcox about his will, and he said, 'Half a sheet of note-paper will do it, Simcox. I'll make my intentions very clear, and there will be nobody to dispute them. And as to details of what little'—he called it little!—'I possess in the world, I want no notes to aid my memory. The doctor, however, positively prevented anything being done to-day, and strictly interdicted him from hearing any matters of business whatsoever. And it is strange enough, that if not brought up before him, he will not advert to these topics at all, but continue to wander on about his past life, and whether he had done wisely in this, or that, or the other, mixing very worldly thoughts and motives very oddly at times with those that belong to more serious considerations. Poor Mr. Augustus," continued he, after a short breathing moment. "He does not know what to do! He was never permitted to take any part in business, and he knows no more of Bramleigh and Underwood than you do. And now he is obliged to open all letters marked immediate or urgent, and to make the best replies he can, to give directions, and to come to decisions, in fact, on things he never so much as heard of. And all this while he is well aware that if his father should recover, he'll not forgive him the liberty he has taken to open his correspondence. Can you imagine a more difficult or painful situation?"

"I think much of the embarrassment might be diminished, Mr. Harding, by his taking you into his counsels."

"Ah! and that's the very thing I'll not suffer him to do. No, no, sir, I know the Colonel too well for that. He may, when he is well and about again, he may forgive his son, his

son and heir, for having possessed himself with a knowledge of many important details; but he'd not forgive the agent, Mr. Harding. I think I can hear the very words he'd use. He said once on a time to me, 'I want no Grand Vizier, Harding; I'm Sultan and Grand Vizier too.' So I said to Mr. Augustus, 'I've no head for business after dinner, and particularly when I have tasted your father's prime Madeira.' And it is true, sir; true as you stand there. The doctor and I had finished the second decanter before we took our coffee."

L'Estrange now looked the speaker fully in the face; and to his astonishment saw that signs of his having drank freely —which, strangely enough, had hitherto escaped his notice —were now plainly to be seen there.

"No, sir, not a bit tipsy," said Harding, interpreting his glance; "not even what Mr. Cutbill calls 'tight!' I won't go so far as to say I'd like to make up a complicated account; but for an off-hand question as to the value of a standing crop, or an allowance for improvements in the case of a tenant at will, I'm as good as ever I felt. What's more, sir, it's seventeen years since I took so much wine before. It was the day I got my appointment to the agency, Mr. L'Estrange. I was weak enough to indulge on that occasion, and the Colonel said to me, 'As much wine as you like, Harding—a pipe of it, if you please; but don't be garrulous.' The word sobered me, sir—sobered me at once. I was offended, I'll not deny it; but I couldn't afford to show that I felt it. I shut up; and from that hour to this I never was 'garrulous' again. Is it boasting to say, sir, that it's not every man who could do as much?"

The curate bowed politely, as if in concurrence.

"You never thought me garrulous, sir?"

"Never, indeed, Mr. Harding."

"No, sir, it was not the judgment the world passed on me. Men have often said Harding is cautious, Harding is reserved, Harding is guarded in what he says; but none have presumed to say I was garrulous."

"I must say I think you dwell too much on a mere passing expression. It was not exactly polite; but I am sure it was not intended to convey either a grave censure or a fixed opinion."

"I hope so; I hope so, with all my heart, sir," said he, pathetically. But his drooping head and depressed look showed how little of encouragement the speech gave him.

"Mr. Augustus begs you'll come to him in the library, sir," said a footman, entering, and to L'Estrange's great relief, coming to his rescue from his tiresome companion.

"I think I'd not mention the matter *now*," said Harding, with a sigh. "They've trouble and sickness in the house, and the moment would be unfavourable; but you'll not forget it, sir, you'll not forget that I want that expression recalled, or at least the admission that it was used inadvertently."

L'Estrange nodded assent, and hurried away to the library.

"The man of all others I wanted to see," said Augustus, meeting him with an outstretched hand. "What on earth has kept you away from us of late?"

"I fancied you were all a little cold towards me," said the curate, blushing deeply as he spoke; "but if I thought you wanted me, I'd not have suffered my suspicion to interfere. I'd have come up at once."

"You're a good fellow, and I believe you thoroughly. There has been no coldness; at least, I can swear, none on my part, nor any that I know of elsewhere. We are in great trouble. You've heard about my poor father's seizure—indeed you saw him when it was impending, and now here am I in a position of no common difficulty. The doctors have declared that they will not answer for his life, or, if he lives, for his reason, if he be disturbed or agitated by questions relating to business. They have, for greater impressiveness, given this opinion in writing, and signed it. I have telegraphed the decision to the firm, and have received this reply, 'Open all marked urgent, and answer.' Now, you don't know my father very long, or very intimately, but I think you know enough of him to be aware what a dangerous step is this they now press me to take. First of all, I know no more of his affairs than you do. It is not only that he never confided anything to me, but he made it a rule never to advert to a matter of business before any of us. And to such an extent did he carry his jealousy—if it was jealousy—in this respect, that he would immediately interpose if Underwood or the senior clerk said anything about money matters, and remark, 'These young gentlemen take no interest in such subjects; let us talk of something they can take their share in.' Nor was this abstention on his part without a touch of sarcasm, for he would occasionally talk a little to my sister Marion on bank matters, and constantly said, 'Why weren't you a boy, Marion? You could have taken the helm when

it was my watch below.' This showed what was the estimate he had formed of myself and my brothers. I mention all these things to you now, that you may see the exact danger of the position I am forced to occupy. If I refuse to act, if I decline to open the letters on pressing topics, and by my refusal lead to all sorts of complications and difficulties, I shall but confirm him, whenever he recovers, in his depreciatory opinion of me; and if, on the other hand, I engage in the correspondence, who is to say that I may not be possessing myself of knowledge that he never intended I should acquire, and which might produce a fatal estrangement between us in future? And this is the doubt and difficulty in which you now find me. Here I stand surrounded with these letters—look at that pile yonder—and I have not courage to decide what course to take."

"And he is too ill to consult with?"

"The doctors have distinctly forbidden one syllable on any business matter."

"It's strange enough that it was a question which bore upon all this brought me up here to-night. Your father had promised me a letter to Lady Augusta at Rome, with reference to a chaplaincy I was looking for, and he told Belton to inform me that he had written the letter and sealed it, and left it on the table in the library. We found it there, as he said, only not sealed; and though that point was not important, it suggested a discussion between Julia and myself whether I had or had not the right to read it, being a letter of presentation, and regarding myself alone. We could not agree as to what ought to be done, and resolved at last to take the letter over to you, and say, If you feel at liberty to let me hear what is in this, read it for me: if you have any scruples on the score of reading, seal it, and the matter is ended at once. This is the letter."

Augustus took it, and regarded it leisurely for a moment.

"I think I need have no hesitation here," said he. "I break no seal, at least."

He withdrew the letter carefully from the envelope, and opened it.

"'Dear Sedley,'" read he, and stopped. "Why, this is surely a mistake; this was not intended for Lady Augusta;" and he turned to the address, which ran, "The Lady Augusta Bramleigh, Villa Altieri, Rome." "What can this mean?"

"He has put it in a wrong envelope."

"Exactly so, and probably sealed the other, which led to

his remark to Belton. I suppose it may be read now. 'Dear Sedley—Have no fears about the registry. First of all, I do not believe any exists of the date required; and secondly, there will be neither church, nor parson, nor register here in three months hence.'" Augustus stopped and looked at L'Estrange. Each face seemed the reflex of the other, and the look of puzzled horror was the same on both. "I must go on, I can't help it," muttered Augustus, and continued: "'I have spoken to the dean, who agrees with me that Portshandon need not be retained as a parish. Something, of course, must be done for the curate here. You will probably be able to obtain one of the smaller livings for him in the Chancellor's patronage. So much for the registry difficulty, which indeed was never a difficulty at all till it occurred to your legal acuteness to make it such.'

"There is more here, but I am unwilling to read on," said Augustus, whose face was now crimson, "and yet, L'Estrange," added he, "it may be that I shall want your counsel in this very matter. I'll finish it." And he read, "'The more I reflect on the plan of a compromise the less I like it, and I cannot for the life of me see how it secures finality. If this charge is to be revived in my son's time, it will certainly not be met with more vigour or more knowledge than I can myself contribute to it. Every impostor gains by the lapse of years—bear *that* in mind. The difficulties which environ explanations are invariably in favour of the rogue, just because fiction is more plausible often than truth. It is not pleasant to admit, but I am forced to own that there is not one amongst my sons who has either the stamina or the energy to confront such a peril; so that, if the battle be really to be fought, let it come on while I am yet here, and in health and vigour to engage in it.

"'There are abundant reasons why I cannot confide the matter to any of my family—one will suffice: there is not one of them except my eldest daughter who would not be crushed by the tidings, and though she has head enough, she has not the temper for a very exciting and critical struggle.

"'What you tell me of Jack and his indiscretion will serve to show you how safe I should be in the hands of my sons, and he is possibly about as wise as his brothers, though less pretentious than the diplomatist; and as for Augustus, I have great misgivings. If the time should ever come when he should have convinced himself that this claim was good —and sentimental reasons would always have more weight

with him than either law or logic—I say, if such a time should arrive, he's just the sort of nature that would prefer the martyrdom of utter beggary to the assertion of his right, and the vanity of being equal to the sacrifice would repay him for the ruin. There *are* fellows of this stamp, and I have terrible fears that I have one of them for a son.'"

Augustus laid down the letter and tried to smile, but his lip trembled hysterically, and his voice was broken and uncertain as he said: "This is a hard sentence, George—I wish I had never read it. What can it all mean?" cried he, after a minute or more of what seemed cruel suffering. "What is this claim? Who is this rogue? and what is this charge that can be revived and pressed in another generation? Have you ever heard of this before? or can you make anything out of it now? Tell me, for mercy's sake, and do not keep me longer in this agony of doubt and uncertainty."

"I have not the faintest clue to the meaning of all this. It reads as if some one was about to prefer a claim to your father's estate, and that your lawyer had been advising a compromise with him."

"But a compromise is a sort of admission that the claimant was not an impostor—that he had his rights!"

"There are rights, and rights! There are demands, too, that it is often better to conciliate than to defy—even though defiance would be successful."

"And how is it that I never heard of this before?" burst he out, indignantly. "Has a man the right to treat his son in this fashion? to bring him up in the unbroken security of succeeding to an inheritance that the law may decide he has no title to?"

"I think that is natural enough. Your father evidently did not recognize this man's right, and felt there was no need to impart the matter to his family."

"But why should my father be the judge in his own cause?"

L'Estrange smiled faintly: the line in the Colonel's letter, in which he spoke of his son's sensitiveness occurred to him at once.

"I see how you treat my question," said Augustus. "It reminds you of the character my father gave me. What do you say then to that passage about the registry? Why, if we be clean-handed in this business, do we want to make short work of all records?"

"I simply say I can make nothing of it."

"Is it possible, think you, that Marion knows this story?"

"I think it by no means unlikely."

"It would account for much that has often puzzled me," said Augustus, musing as he spoke. "A certain self assertion that she has, and a habit, too, of separating her own interests from those of the rest of us, as though speculating on a time when she should walk alone. Have you remarked that?"

"*I!* I," said L'Estrange, smiling, "remark nothing! there is not a less observant fellow breathing."

"If it were not for those words about the parish registry, George," said the other, in a grave tone, "I'd carry a light heart about all this; I'd take my father's version of this fellow, whoever he is, and believe him to be an impostor; but I don't like the notion of foul play, and it does mean foul play."

L'Estrange was silent, and for some minutes neither spoke.

"When my father," said Augustus—and there was a tone of bitterness now in his voice—"When my father drew that comparison between himself and his sons, he may have been flattering his superior intellect at the expense of some other quality."

Another and a longer pause succeeded.

At last L'Estrange spoke,—

"I have been running over in my head all that could bear upon this matter, and now I remember a couple of weeks ago that Longworth, who came with a French friend of his to pass an evening at the cottage, led me to talk of the parish church and its history; he asked me if it had not been burnt by the rebels in '98, and seemed surprised when I said it was only the vestry-room and the books that had been destroyed. 'Was not that strange?' asked he; 'did the insurgents usually interest themselves about parochial records?' I felt a something like a sneer in the question, and made him no reply."

"And who was the Frenchman?"

"A certain Count Pracontal, whom Longworth met in Upper Egypt. By the way, he was the man Jack led over the high bank, where the poor fellow's leg was broken."

"I remember; he, of course has no part in the story we are now discussing. Longworth may possibly know something. Are you intimate with him?"

"No, we are barely acquainted. I believe he was rather flattered by the very slight attention we showed himself and his friend; but his manner was shy, and he is a diffident, bashful sort of man, not easy to understand."

"Look here, L'Estrange," said Augustus, laying his hand on the other's shoulder. "All that has passed between us here to-night is strictly confidential, to be divulged to no one, not even your sister. As for this letter, I'll forward it to Sedley, for whom it was intended. I'll tell him how it chanced that I read it; and then—and then—the rest will take its own course."

"I wonder if Julia intends to come back with me?" said L'Estrange, after a pause.

"No. Nelly has persuaded her to stay here, and I think there is no reason why you should not also."

"No. I'm always uncomfortable away from my own den; but I'll be with you early to-morrow; good-night."

Nelly and Julia did not go to bed till day break. They passed the night writing a long letter to Jack—the greater part being dictated by Julia while Nelly wrote. It was an urgent entreaty to him to yield to the advice of his brother officers, and withdraw the offensive words he had used to the Admiral. It was not alone his station, his character, and his future in life were pressed into the service, but the happiness of all who loved him and wished him well, with a touching allusion to his poor father's condition, and the impossibility of asking any aid or counsel from him. Nelly went on: "Remember, dear Jack, how friendless and deserted I shall be if I lose you; and it would be next to losing you to know you had quitted the service, and gone Heaven knows where, to do Heaven knows what." She then adverted to home, and said, "You know how happy and united we were all here, once on a time. This is all gone: Marion and Temple hold themselves quite apart, and Augustus, evidently endeavouring to be neutral, is isolated. I only say this to show you how, more than ever, I need your friendship and affection; nor is it the least sad of all my tidings, the L'Estranges are going to leave this. There is to be some new arrangement by which Portshandon is to be united to Killmulluck, and one church to serve for the two parishes. George and Julia think of going to Italy. I can scarcely tell you how I feel this desertion of me now, dearest Jack. I'd bear up against all these and worse—if worse there be—were I only to feel that you were following out

your road to station and success, and that the day was coming when I should be as proud as I am fond of you. You hate writing, I know, but you will, I'm sure, not fail to send me half a dozen lines to say that I have not pleaded in vain. I fear I shall not soon be able to send you pleasant news from this, the gloom thickens every day around us, but you shall hear constantly." The letter ended with a renewed entreaty to him to place himself in the hands and under the guidance of such of his brother officers as he could rely on for sound judgment and moderation. "Remember, Jack, I ask you to do nothing that shall peril honour; but also nothing in anger, nothing out of wounded self-love."

"Add one line, only one, Julia," said she, handing the pen to her and pushing the letter before her; and without a word Julia wrote: "A certain coquette of your acquaintance—heartless of course as all her tribe—is very sorry for your trouble, and would do all in her power to lessen it. To this end she begs you to listen patiently to the counsels of the present letter, every line of which she has read, and to believe that in yielding something—if it should be so—to the opinion of those who care for you, you acquire a new right to their affection, and a stronger title to their love."

Nelly threw her arm around Julia's neck and kissed her again and again.

"Yes, darling, these dear words will sink into his heart, and he will not refuse our prayer."

CHAPTER XXV.

MARION'S AMBITIONS.

Colonel Bramleigh's malady took a strange form, and one which much puzzled his physicians: his feverish symptoms gradually disappeared, and to his paroxysms of passion and excitement there now succeeded a sort of dreary apathy, in which he scarcely uttered a word, nor was it easy to say whether he heard or heeded the remarks around him. This state was accompanied by a daily increasing debility, as though the powers of life were being gradually exhausted, and that, having no more to strive for or desire, he cared no more to live.

The whole interest of his existence now seemed to centre around the hour when the post arrived. He had ordered that the letter-bag should be opened in his presence, and as the letters were shown him one by one, he locked them, unopened and unread, in a despatch-box, so far strictly obedient to the dictates of the doctor, who had forbidden him all species of excitement. His family had been too long accustomed to the reserve and distance he observed towards them to feel surprised that none were in this critical hour admitted to his confidence, and that it was in presence of his valet, Dorose, the letters were sorted and separated, and such as had no bearing on matters of business sent down to be read by the family.

It was while he continued in this extraordinary state, intermediate as it seemed between sleeping and waking, a telegram came from Sedley to Augustus, saying—"Highly important to see your father. Could he confer with me if I go over? Reply at once." The answer was—"Unlikely that you can see him; but come on the chance."

Before sending off this reply, Augustus had taken the telegram up to Marion's room, to ask her advice in the matter. "You are quite, right, Gusty," said she, "for if Sedley cannot see papa, he can certainly see Lord Culduff."

"Lord Culduff," cried he, in amazement. "Why, what

could Lord Culduff possibly know about my father's affairs? How could he be qualified to give an opinion upon them?"

"Simply on the grounds of his great discrimination, his great acuteness, joined to a general knowledge of life, in which he has admittedly few rivals."

"Grant all that; but here are special questions, here are matters essentially personal; and with all his lordship's tact and readiness, yet he is not one of us."

"He may be, though, and very soon too," replied she, promptly.

"What do you mean?" asked he, in a voice of almost dismay.

"Just what I say, Augustus; and I am not aware it is a speech that need excite either the amazement or the terror I see in your face at this moment."

"I *am* amazed; and if I understand you aright, I have grounds to be shocked besides."

"Upon my word," said she, in a voice that trembled with passion, "I have reason to congratulate myself on the score of brotherly affection. Almost the last words Jack spoke to me at parting were, 'For God's sake, shake off that old scamp;' and now you—that hold a very different position amongst us—you, who will one day be the head of the family, deliberately tell me you are shocked at the prospect of my being allied to one of the first names in the peerage."

"My dear Marion," said he, tenderly, "it is not the name, it is not the rank, I object to."

"It is his fortune, then? I'm sure it can't be his abilities."

"It is neither. It is simply that the man might be your grandfather."

"Well, sir," said she, drawing herself up, and assuming a manner of intense hauteur, "and if *I*—I conclude I am the person most to be consulted—if I do not regard this disparity of years as an insurmountable obstacle, by what right can one of my family presume to call it such?"

"My dear sister," said he, "can you not imagine the right of a brother to consult for your happiness?"

"Happiness is a very large word. If it were for Nelly that you were interesting yourself, I've no doubt your advice and counsel ought to have great weight; but I am not one of your love-in-a-cottage young ladies, Gusty. I am, I must own it, excessively worldly. Whatever happiness I could propose to myself in life is essentially united to a certain ambition. We have as many of the advantages of mere

wealth as most people: as fine equipage, as many footmen, as good a cook, and as costly silver; and what do they do for us? They permit us simply to enter the lists with a set of people who have high-stepping horses and powdered lacqueys like ourselves, but who are no more the world, no more society, than one of papa's Indiamen is a ship of the Royal Navy. Why do I say this to you, who were at Oxford, who saw it all—ay, and felt it all—in those fresh years of youth when these are sharp sufferings? You know well—you told me your griefs at the time—that you were in a set without being 'of it;' that the stamp of inequality was as indelibly fixed upon you as though you were a corporal and wore coarse cloth. Now, these things are hard to bear for a man, for a woman they are intolerable. She has not the hundred and one careers in life in which individual distinction can obliterate the claims of station. She has but one stage—the *salon;* but, to her, this narrow world, soft-carpeted and damask-curtained, is a very universe, and without the recognized stamp of a certain rank in it, she is absolutely nothing."

"And may not all these things be bought too dearly, Marion?"

"I don't know the price I'd call too high for them."

"What! Not your daily happiness? not your self-esteem! not the want of the love of one who would have your whole heart in his keeping?"

"So he may, if he can give me the rank I care for."

"Oh, Marion! I cannot think this of you," cried he, bitterly.

"That is to say, that you want me to deceive you with false assurances of unbought affection and the like; and you are angry because I will not play the hypocrite. Lord Culduff has made me an offer of his hand, and I have accepted it. You are aware that I am my own mistress. Whatever I possess, it is absolutely my own; and though I intend to speak with my father, and, if it may be, obtain his sanction, I will not say that his refusal would induce me to break off my engagement."

"At all events, you are not yet this man's wife, Marion," said he, with more determination than he had yet shown; "and I forbid you positively to impart to Lord Culduff anything regarding this telegram."

"I make no promises."

"You may have no regard for the interests of your family, but possibly you will care for some of your own," said he,

fiercely. "Now, I tell you distinctly, there are very grave perils hanging over us at this moment—perils of which I cannot measure the amount nor the consequences. I can only dimly perceive the direction from which they come; and I warn you, for your own sake, make no confidences beyond the bounds of your own family."

"You are superbly mysterious, Gusty; and if I were impressionable on this kind of matter, I half suspect you might terrify me. Papa ought to have committed a forgery, at least, to justify your dark insinuations."

"There is no question of a forgery; but there may be that which, in the end, will lead to a ruin as complete as any forgery."

"I know what you mean," said she, in a careless, easy tone; "the bank has made use of private securities and title-deeds, just as those other people did—I forget their names—a couple of years ago."

"It is not even that; but I repeat the consequences may be to the full as disastrous."

"You allude to this unhappy scrape of Jack's."

"I do not. I was not then thinking of it."

"Because as to that, Lord Culduff said there never yet grew a tree where there wasn't a branch or two might be lopped off with advantage. If Jack doesn't think his station in life worth preserving, all the teaching in the world won't persuade him to maintain it."

"Poor Jack!" said he, bitterly.

"Yes, I say, poor Jack! too. I think it's exactly the epithet to apply to one whose spirit is so much beneath his condition."

"You are terribly changed, Marion. I do not know if you are aware of it?"

"I hope I am. I trust that I look at the events around me from a higher level than I have been accustomed to hitherto."

"And is my father in a state to be consulted on a matter of this importance?" asked he, half indignantly.

"Papa has already been spoken to about it; and it is by his own desire we are both to see him this evening."

"Am I the only one here who knew nothing of all this?"

"You should have been told formally this morning, Augustus. Lord Culduff only waited for a telegram from Mr. Cutbill to announce to you his intentions and his—hopes." A slight hesitation delayed the word.

"These things I can't help," said he bitterly, and as if speaking to himself. "They have been done without my knowledge, and regardless of me in every way; but I do protest, strongly protest, against Lord Culduff being introduced into matters which are purely our own."

"I never knew till now that we had family secrets," said she, with an insolent air.

"You may learn it later on, perhaps, and without pleasure."

"So, then, these are the grave perils you tried to terrify me with a while ago. You forget, Augustus, that I have secured my passage in another ship. Personally, at least, I am in no danger."

"I did forget that. I did indeed forget how completely you could disassociate yourself from the troubles of your family."

"But what is going to happen to us? They can't shoot Jack because he called his commanding officer an ugly name. They can't indite papa because he refused to be high-sheriff. And if the world is angry with you, Gusty, it is not certainly because you like the company of men of higher station than your own."

He flushed at the sarcasm that her speech half revealed, and turned away to hide his irritation.

"Shall I tell you frankly, Gusty," continued she, "that I believe nothing—absolutely nothing—of these impending calamities? There is no sword suspended over us; or if there be, it is by a good strong cord, which will last our time. There are always plenty of dark stories in the City. Shares fall and great houses tumble; but papa told me scores of times that he never put all his eggs into one basket; and Bramleigh and Underwood will be good names for many a day to come. Shall I tell you, my dear Augustus, what I suspect to be the greatest danger that now hangs over us? And I am quite ready to admit it is a heavy one."

"What is it?"

"The peril *I* mean is, that your sister Nelly will marry the curate. Oh, you may look shocked and incredulous, and cry impossible, if you like; but we girls are very shrewd detectives over each other, and what I tell you is only short of certainty."

"He has not a shilling in the world; nor has she, independently of my father."

"That's the reason. That's the reason! These are the

troths that are never broken. There is nothing aids fidelity like beggary."

"He has neither friends nor patrons; he told me himself he has not the vaguest hope of advancement."

"Exactly so: and just for that they will be married! Now it reminds me," said she, aloud, "of what papa once said to me. The man who wants to build up a name and a family, ought to have few children. With a large household, some one or other will make an unhappy alliance, and one deserter disgraces the army."

"A grave consideration for Lord Culduff at this moment," said he, with a humorous twinkle of the eye.

"We have talked it over already," said she.

"Once for all, Marion, no confidences about what I have been talking of." And so saying he went his way.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. CUTBILL ARRIVES AT CASTELLO.

On the eve of that day on which the conversation in the last chapter occurred, Mr. Cutbill arrived at Castello. He came full of town news: he brought with him the latest scandals of society, and the last events in politics; he could tell of what was doing in Downing Street, and what was about to be done in the City. In fact, he had the sort of budget that was sure to amuse a country audience, and yet, to his astonishment, he found none to question, none even to listen to him. Colonel Bramleigh's illness had thrown a gloom over all. The girls relieved each other in watches beside their father, and Augustus and Temple dined together alone, as Lord Culduff's gout still detained him in his room. It was as the dinner drew to its close that Mr. Cutbill was announced.

"It ain't serious, I hope? I mean, they don't think the case dangerous?" said he, as he arranged his napkin on his knee.

Augustus only shook his head in silence.

"Why, what age is he? not sixty?"

"Fifty-one—fifty-two in June."

"That's not old; that's the prime of life, especially when a man has taken nothing out of himself."

"He was always temperate; most temperate."

"Just so; even his own choice Mouton didn't tempt him into the second bottle. I remember that well. I said to myself, 'Tom Cutbill, that green seal wouldn't fare so well in your keeping.' I had *such* a bag of news for him. All the rogueries on 'Change, fresh and fresh. I suppose it is quite hopeless to think of telling him now?"

"Not to be thought of."

"How he'd have liked to have heard about Hewlett and Bell! They're gone for close on two millions; they'll not pay over sixpence in the pound, and Rinker, the Bombay fellow that went in for cotton, has caught it too! Cotton and indigo have ruined more men than famine and pestilence.

I'd be shot, if I was a Lord of the Council, if I wouldn't have a special prayer for them in the Litany. Well, Temple, and how are you, all this while?" said he, turning abruptly to the diplomatist, who sat evidently inattentive to the dialogue.

"What, sir, did you address *me?*" cried he, with a look of astonishment and indignation.

"I should think I did; and I never heard you were Premier Earl, or that other thing of England, that you need look so shocked at the liberty! You Foreign Office swells are very grand folk to each other; but take my word for it, the world. the real world, thinks very little of you."

Temple arose slowly from his place, threw his napkin on the table, and turning to Augustus, said, "You'll find me in the library," and withdrew.

"That's dignified, I take it," said Cutbill; "but to my poor appreciation, it's not the way to treat a guest under his father's roof."

"A guest has duties, Mr. Cutbill, as well as rights; my brother is not accustomed to the sort of language you address to him, nor is he at all to blame if he decline to hear more of it."

"So that I am to gather you think he was right."

Augustus bowed coldly.

"It just comes to what I said one day to Harding; the sailor is the only fellow in the house a man can get on with. I'm sorry, heartily sorry for him."

The last words were in a tone of sincere feeling, and Augustus asked, "What do you mean by sorry? what has happened to him?"

"Haven't you seen it in the *Times*—no, you couldn't though—it was only in this morning's edition, and I have it somewhere. There's to be a court-martial on him; he's to be tried on board the *Ramsay*, at Portsmouth, for disobedience and indiscipline, and using to his superior officer—old Colthurst—words unbecoming the dignity of the service and the character of an officer, or the dignity of an officer and the character of the service—it's all the one gauge, but he'll be broke and cashiered all the same."

"I thought that if he were to recall something, if he would make some explanation, which he might without any peril to honour——"

"That's exactly how it was, and when I heard he was in a scrape I started off to Portsmouth to see him."

"You did?" exclaimed Augustus, looking now with a very different expression at the other.

"To be sure I did; I went down by the mail train, and stayed with him till the one-forty express started next day, and I might have saved myself the trouble."

"You could make no impression upon him?"

"Not a bit—as well talk to that oak sideboard there; he'd sit and smoke and chat very pleasantly too, about anything, I believe; he'd tell about his life up in town, and what he lost at the races, and how near he was to a good thing on the Riddlesworth; but not a word, not so much as a syllable, would he say about his own hobble. It was growing late; we had had a regular bang-up breakfast—turtle steaks and a devilled lobster, and plenty of good champagne—not the sweet stuff your father gives us down here—but dry 'mum,' that had a flavour of Marcobrunner about it. He's a rare fellow to treat a man, is Jack; and so I said—not going about the bush, but bang into the thicket at once—'What's this stupid row you've got into with your Admiral? what's it all about?'

"'It's about a service regulation, Master Cutbill,' said he, with a stiff look on him. 'A service regulation that you wouldn't understand if you heard it.'

"'You think,' said I, 'that out of culverts and cuttings, Tom Cutbill's opinion is not worth much?'

"'No, no, not that, Cutbill: I never said that,' said he, laughing; 'but you see that we sailors not only have all sorts of technicals for the parts of a ship, but we have technical meanings for even the words of common life, so that though I might call you a consummate humbug, I couldn't say as much to a Vice-Admiral without the risk of being judged by professional etiquette.'

"'But you didn't call him that, did you?' said I.

"'I'll call *you* worse, Cutty,' says he, laughing, 'if you don't take your wine.'

"'And now, Jack,' said I, 'it's on the stroke of one; I must start with the express at one-forty, and as I came down here for nothing on earth but to see if I could be of any use to you, don't let me go away only as wise as I came; be frank and tell me all about this business, and when I go back to town it will push me hard if I can't do something with the Somerset House fellows to pull you through.'

"You are a good-hearted dog, Cutty,' says he, 'and I

thought so the first day I saw you; but my scrape, as you call it, is just one of those things you'd only blunder in. My fine brother Temple, or that much finer gentleman, Lord Culduff, who can split words into the thinnest of veneers, might possibly make such a confusion that it would be hard to see who was right or who was wrong in the whole affair; but *you*, Cutty, with your honest intentions and your vulgar good sense, would be sure to offend every one. There, don't lose your train; don't forget the cheroots and the punch, and some pleasant books, if they be writing any such just now.'

"'If you want money,' said I—'I mean for the defence.'

"'Not sixpence for the lawyers, Cutty; of that you may take your oath,' said he, as he shook my hand. 'I'd as soon think of sending the wardroom dinner overboard to the sharks.' We parted, and the next thing I saw of him was that paragraph in the *Times*."

"How misfortunes thicken around us. About a month or six weeks ago, when you came down here first, I suppose there wasn't a family in the kingdom could call itself happier."

"You *did* look jolly, that I *will* say; but somehow—you'll not take the remark ill—I saw that, as we rail-folk say, it was a capital line for ordinary regular traffic, but would be sure to break down if you had a press of business."

"I don't understand you."

"I mean that, so long as it was only a life of daily pleasure and enjoyment was before you—that the gravest question of the day was what horse you'd ride, or whom you'd invite to dinner—so long as that lasted the machine would work well—no jar, no friction anywhere; but if once trouble—and I mean real trouble—was to come down upon you, it would find you all at sixes and sevens—no order, no discipline anywhere, and, what's worse, no union. But you know it better than I do. You see yourself that no two of you pull together; ain't that a fact?"

Augustus shook his head mournfully, but was silent.

"I like to see people jolly, because they understand each other, and are fond of each other, because they take pleasure in the same things, and feel that the success of one is the success of all. There's no merit in being jolly over ten thousand a year and a house like Windsor Castle. Now, just look at what is going on, I may call it, under our noses here: does your sister Marion care a brass farthing

for Jack's misfortunes, or does he feel a bit elated about her going to marry a viscount? Are you fretting your heart to ribbons because that fine young gent that left us a while ago is about to be sent envoy to Bogota? And that's fact, though he don't know it yet," added he, in a chuckling whisper. "It's a regular fair-weather family, and if it comes on to blow, you'll see if there's a storm-sail amongst you."

"Apparently, then, you were aware of what was only divulged to me this evening?" said Augustus. "I mean the intended marriage of Lord Culduff to my sister."

"I should say I was aware of it. I was, so to say, promoter and projector. It was I started the enterprise. It was that took me over to town. I went to square that business of old Culduff. There was a question to be asked in the House about his appointment that would have led to a debate, or what they call a conversation—about the freest kind of after-dinner talk imaginable — and they'd have ripped up the old reprobate's whole life — and I assure *you* there are passages in it wouldn't do for the *Methodists' Magazine*—so I went over to negotiate a little matter with Joel, who had, as I well knew, a small sheaf of Norton's bills. I took Joel down to Greenwich to give him a fish-dinner, and talk the thing over, and we were right comfortable and happy over some red Hermitage—thirty shillings a bottle, mind you—when we heard a yell, just a yell, from the next room, and in walks—whom do you think?—Norton himself, with his napkin in his hand—he was dining with a set of fellows from the Garrick, and he swaggered in and sat down at our table. 'What infernal robbery are you two concocting here?' said he. 'When the waiter told me who were the fellows at dinner together, I said, These rascals are like the witches in Macbeth, and they never meet without there's mischief in the wind.'"

"The way he put it was so strong, there was something so home in it, that I burst out and told him the whole story, and that it was exactly himself, and no other, was the man we were discussing.

"'And you thought,' said he, 'you thought that, if you had a hold of my acceptances, you'd put the screw on me and squeeze me as flat as you pleased. Oh, generation of silkworms, ain't you soft!' cried he, laughing. 'Order up another bottle of this, for I want to drink your healths. You've actually made my fortune!

The thing will now be first rate. The Culduff inquiry was a mere matter of public morals, but here, here is a direct attempt to coerce or influence a member of Parliament. I'll have you both at the Bar of the House as sure as my name is Norton.'

"He then arose and began to rehearse the speech he'd make when we were arraigned, and a spicier piece of abuse I never listened to. The noise he made brought the other fellows in from the next room, and he ordered them to make a house, and one was named speaker and another black rod, and we were taken into custody and duly purged of our contempt by paying for all the wine drank by the entire company, a trifle of five-and-thirty pounds odd. The only piece of comfort I got at all was getting into the rail to go back to town, when Norton whispered me, 'It's all right about Culduff. Parliament is dissolved; the House rises on Tuesday, and he'll not be mentioned.'"

"But does all this bear on the question of marriage?"

"Quite naturally. Your father pulls Culduff out of the mire, and the Viscount proposes for your sister. It's all contract business the whole world over. By the way, where is our noble friend? I suppose, all things considered, I owe him a visit."

"You'll find him in his room. He usually dines alone, and I believe Temple is the only one admitted."

"I'll send up my name," said he, rising to ring the bell for the servant: "and I'll call myself lucky if he'll refuse to see me."

"His lordship will be glad to see Mr. Cutbill as soon as convenient to him," replied the servant on his return.

"All my news for him is not so favourable as this," whispered Cutbill, as he moved away. "They won't touch the mine in the City. That last murder, though it was down in Tipperary, a hundred and fifty miles away from this, has frightened them all; and they say they're quite ready to do something at Lagos, or the Gaboon, but nothing here. 'You see,' say they, 'if they cut one or two of our people's heads off in Africa, we get up a gun-brig, and burn the barracoons and slaughter a whole village for it, and this restores confidence; but in Ireland it always ends with a debate in the House, that shows the people to have great wrongs and great patience, and that their wild justice, as some one called it, was all right; and that, sir, *that* does not restore confidence.' Good-night."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VILLA ALTIERI.

THERE is a short season in which a villa within the walls of old Rome realizes all that is positive ecstasy in the life of Italy. This season begins usually towards the end of February and continues through the month of March. This interval—which in less favoured lands is dedicated to storms of rain and sleet, east winds and equinoctial gales, tumbling chimney-pots and bronchitis — is here signalized by all that Spring, in its most voluptuous abundance, can pour fourth: vegetation comes out, not with the laggard step of northern climes—slow, cautious, and distrustful—but bursting at once from bud to blossom as though impatient for the fresh air of life and the warm rays of the sun. The very atmosphere laughs and trembles with vitality: from the panting lizard on the urn to the myriad of insects on the grass, it is life everywhere; and over all sweeps the delicious odour of the verbena and the violet, almost overpowering with perfume, so that one feels, in such a land, the highest ecstasy of existence is that same dreamy state begotten of impressions derived from blended sense, where tone and tint and odour mingle almost into one.

Perhaps the loveliest spot of Rome in this loveliest of seasons was the Villa Altieri. It stood on a slope of the Pincian, defended from north and east, and looking eastward over the Campagna towards the hills of Albano. A thick ilex grove, too thick and dark for Italian, though perfect to English taste, surrounded the house, offering alleys of shade that even the noonday's sun found impenetrable; while beneath the slope, and under shelter of the hill, lay a delicious garden, memorable by a fountain designed by Thorwaldsen, where four Naiades splash the water at each other under the fall of a cataract; this being the costly caprice of the Cardinal Altieri, to complete which he had to conduct the water from the Lake of Albano. Unlike most Italian gardens, the plants and shrubs were not merely those of the

south, but all that the culture of Holland and England could contribute to fragrance and colour were also there, and the gorgeous tulips of the Hague, the golden ranunculus and crimson carnation, which attain their highest beauty in moister climates, here were varied with chrysanthemums and camellias. Gorgeous creepers trailed from tree to tree or gracefully trained themselves around the marble groups, and clusters of orange-trees, glittering with golden fruit, relieved in their darker green the almost too glaring brilliancy of colour.

At a window which opened to the ground—and from which a view of the garden, and beyond the garden the rich woods of the Borghese Villa, and beyond these again, the massive dome of St. Peter's, extended—sat two ladies, so wonderfully alike that a mere glance would have proclaimed them to be sisters. It is true the Countess Balderoni was several years older than Lady Augusta Bramleigh, but whether from temperament or the easier flow of an Italian life in comparison with the more wearing excitement of an English existence, she certainly looked little, if anything, her senior.

They were both handsome—at least they had that character of good looks which in Italy is deemed beauty—they were singularly fair, with large, deep-set blue-grey eyes, and light brown hair of a marvellous abundance and silkiest fibre. They were alike soft-voiced and gentle-mannered, and alike strong-willed and obstinate, of an intense selfishness, and very capricious.

"His eminence is late this evening," said Lady Augusta, looking at her watch. "It is nigh eight o'clock."

"I fancy, Gusta, he was not quite pleased with you last night. On going away he said something, I didn't exactly catch it, but it sounded like 'leggierezza;' he thought you had not treated his legends of St. Francis with becoming seriousness."

"If he wanted me to be grave he oughtn't to tell me funny stories."

"The lives of the saints, Gusta!"

"Well, dearest, that scene in the forest where St. Francis asked the devil to flog him, and not to desist even though he should be weak enough to implore it—wasn't that dialogue as droll as anything in Boccaccio?"

"It's not decent, it's not decorous, to laugh at any incident in the lives of holy men."

"Holy men then should never be funny, at least when they

are presented to me, for it's always the absurd side of everything has the greatest attraction for me."

"This is certainly not the spirit which will lead you to the Church!"

"But I thought I told you already, dearest, that it's the road I like, not the end of the journey. Courtship is confessedly better than marriage, and the being converted is infinitely nicer than the state of conviction."

"Oh, Gusta, what are you saying?"

"Saying what I most fervently feel to be true. Don't you know, better even than myself, that it is the zeal to rescue me from the fold of the heretics surrounds me every evening with monsignori and vescovi, and attracts to the sofa where I happen to sit, purple stockings and red, a class of adorers, I am free to own, there is nothing in the lay world to compare with; and don't you know too, that the work of conversion accomplished, these seductive saints will be on the look-out for a new sinner?"

"And is this the sincerity in which you profess your new faith? is it thus that you mean to endow a new edifice to the honour of the Holy Religion?"

"Cara mia! I want worship, homage, and adoration myself, and it is as absolute a necessity of my being, as if I had been born up there, and knew nothing of this base earth and its belongings. Be just, my dearest sister, and see for once the difference between us. You have a charming husband, who never plagues, never bores you, whom you see when it is pleasant to see, and dismiss when you are weary of him. He never worries you about money, he has no especial extravagance, and does not much trouble himself about anything—I have none of these. I am married to a man almost double my age, taken from another class, and imbued with a whole set of notions different from my own. I can't live with *his* people; my own won't have me. What then is left but the refuge of that emotional existence which the Church offers—a sort of pious flirtation with a runaway match in the distance, only it is to be heaven, not Gretna Green."

"So that all this while you have never been serious, Gusta?"

"Most serious! I have actually written to my husband—you read the letter—acquainting him with my intended change of religion, and my desire to mark the sincerity of my profession by that most signal of all proofs—a moneyed one. As I told the Cardinal last night, Heaven is never so sure of us as when we draw on our banker to go there!"

"How you must shock his eminence when you speak in this way."

"So he told me, but I must own he looked very tenderly into my eyes as he said so. Isn't it provoking?" said she, as she arose and moved out into the garden. "No post yet! It is always so, when one is on thorns for a letter. Now when one thinks that the mail arrives at daybreak, what can they possibly mean by not distributing the letters till evening? Did I tell you what I said to Monsignore Ricci, who has some function at the Post Office?"

"No, but I trust it was not a rude speech; he is always so polite."

"I said that as I was ever very impatient for my letters I had requested all my correspondents to write in a great round legible hand, which would give the authorities no pretext for delay, while deciphering their contents."

"I declare, Gusta, I am amazed at you. I cannot imagine how you can venture to say such things to persons in office."

"My dear sister, it is the only way they could ever hear them. There is no freedom of the press here; in society nobody speaks out. What would become of those people if they only heard the sort of stories they tell each other; besides, I'm going to be one of them. They must bear with a little indiscipline. The sergeant always pardons the recruit for being disorderly on the day of enlistment."

The Countess shook her head disapprovingly and was silent.

"Oh, dear! oh, dear!" sighed Lady Augusta. "I wonder what tidings the post will bring me. Will my affectionate and afflicted husband comply with my prayer, and be willing to endow the Church, and secure his own freedom; or will he be sordid, and declare that he can't live without me? I know you'd laugh, dear, or I'd tell you that the man is actually violently in love with me. You've no notion of the difficulty I have to prevent him writing tender letters to me."

"You are too, too bad, I declare," said the other, smothering a rising laugh.

"Of course I'd not permit such a thing. I stand on my dignity, and say, 'Have a care, sir.' Oh, here it comes! here's the post! What! only two letters after all? She's a dun! Madame la Ruelle, Place Vendôme—the cruellest creature that ever made a ball-dress. It is to tell me she can't wait; and I'm so sick of saying she must, that I'll not write any more. And who is this? The post-mark is 'Portshandon.' Oh! I see; here's the name in the corner. This

is from our eldest son, the future head of the house. Mr. Augustus Bramleigh is a bashful creature of about my own age, who was full of going to New Zealand and turning sheep-farmer. True, I assure you; he is an enthusiast about independence; which means he has a grand vocation for the workhouse."

"By what strange turn of events has he become your correspondent?"

"I should say, Dora, it looks ill as regards the money. I'm afraid that this bodes a refusal."

"Would not the shorter way be to read it?" said the other, simply.

"Yes the shorter but perhaps not the sweeter. There are little events in life which are worse than even uncertainties; but here goes:—

"'Castello.

"'My dear Lady Augusta,—

("A very pretty beginning from my son—I mean my husband's son; and yet he could not have commenced 'Dearest Mamma.'")

"'I write my first letter to you at a very painful moment. My poor father was seized on Tuesday last with a most serious and sudden illness, to which the physician as yet hesitates to give a name. It is, however, on the brain or the membranes, and deprives him of all inclination, though not entirely of all power, to use his faculties. He is, moreover, enjoined to avoid every source of excitement, and even forbidden to converse. Of course, under these afflicting circumstances, everything which relates to business in any way is imperatively excluded from his knowledge; and must continue to be so till some change occurs.

"'It is not at such a moment you would expect to hear of a marriage in the family, and yet yesterday my sister Marion was married to Lord Viscount Culduff.'"

Here she laid down the letter, and stared with an expression of almost overwhelmed amazement at her sister. "Lord Culduff! Where's the *Peerage*, Dora? Surely it must be the same who was at Dresden when we were children; he wasn't married—there can be no son. Oh, here he is: 'Henry Plantagenet de Lacey, fourteenth Viscount Culduff; born 9th February, 17—.' Last century. Why,

he's the patriarch of the peers, and she's twenty-four! What can the girl mean?"

"Do read on; I'm impatient for more."

"'The imperative necessity for Lord Culduff to hold himself in readiness for whatever post in the diplomatic service the Minister might desire him to occupy, was the chief reason for the marriage taking place at this conjuncture. My father, however, himself, was very anxious on the subject; and indeed, insisted strongly on being present. The ceremony was accordingly performed in his own room, and I rejoice to say that, though naturally much excited, he does not appear to have sustained any increase of malady from this trying event. I need not tell you the great disparity of age between my sister and her husband: a disparity which I own enlisted me amongst those who opposed the match. Marion, however, so firmly insisted on her right to choose for herself, and her fortune being completely at her own disposal, that all continued opposition would have been not alone unavailing for the present, but a source of coldness and estrangement for the future.

"'The Culduffs'—(how sweetly familiar)—'the Culduffs left this for Paris this day, where I believe they intend to remain till the question of Lord Culduff's post is determined on. My sister ardently hopes it may be in Italy, as she is most desirous to be near you.'"

"Can you imagine such a horror as this woman playing daughter to me and yet going in to dinner before me, and making me feel her rank on every possible occasion! All this here I see is business, nothing but business. The Colonel, it would seem, must have been breaking before they suspected, for all his late speculations have turned out ill. Penstyddin Copper Mine is an utter failure; the New Caledonian Packet Line a smash; and there's a whole list of crippled enterprises. It's very nice of Augustus, however, to say that though he mentions these circumstances, which might possibly reach me through other channels, no event that he could contemplate should in any way affect my income, or any increase of it that I deem essential to my comfort or convenience; and although in total ignorance as he is of all transactions of the house, he begs me to write to himself directly when any question of increased expense should arise—which I certainly will. He's a *buon figliuolo*,

Dolly—that must be said—and it would be shameful not to develop such generous instincts."

"'If my father's illness should be unhappily protracted, means must be taken, I believe, to devolve his share in business matters upon some other. I regret that it cannot possibly be upon myself; but I am totally unequal to the charge, and have not, besides, courage for the heavy responsibility.'"

"That's the whole of it," said she, with a sigh; "and all things considered, it might have been worse."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CASTELLO.

Castello had now become a very dreary abode. Lord and Lady Culduff had taken their departure for Paris. Temple had gone up to town to try and manage an exchange, if by good luck any one could be found to believe that Bogota was a desirable residence, and a fine field for budding diplomacies; and none remained but Nelly and Augustus to relieve each other in watches beside their father's sick-bed.

Young and little experienced in life as she was, Nelly proved a great comfort and support to her brother in these trying hours. At first he told her nothing of the doubts and fears that beset him. In fact they had assumed no shape sufficiently palpable to convey.

"It was his daily custom to go over the letters that each morning brought, and in a few words—the very fewest he could employ—acquaint Mr. Underwood, the junior partner, of his father's precarious state, and protest against being able, in the slightest degree, to offer any views or guidance as to the conduct of matters of business. These would now and then bring replies in a tone that showed how little Underwood himself was acquainted with many of the transactions of the house, and how completely he was accustomed to submit himself to Colonel Bramleigh's guidance. Even in his affected retirement from business, Bramleigh had not withdrawn from the direction of the weightiest of the matters which regarded the firm, and jealously refused any —the slightest—attempt of his partner to influence his judgment.

One of Underwood's letters completely puzzled Augustus; not only by the obscurity of its wording, but by the evident trace in it of the writer's own inability to explain his meaning. There was a passage which ran thus: "Mr. Sedley was down again, and this time the amount is two thousand five hundred, and though I begged he would give me time to communicate with you before honouring so weighty a draft, he replied—I take pains to record his exact words:—

'There is no time for this; I shall think myself very fortunate, and deem Colonel Bramleigh more fortunate still, if I am not forced to call upon you for four times as much within a fortnight.'" After referring to other matters, there was this at the end of the letter—"S—— has just repaid the amount he so lately drew from the bank; he appeared chagrined and out of spirits, merely saying, 'Tell the Colonel the negotiation has broke down, and that I will write to-morrow.'"

The promised letter from Sedley had not come, but in its place was a telegram from him saying, "I find I must see and speak with you; I shall go over by Saturday, and be with you on Sunday morning."

"Of course he cannot see papa," said Nelly; "the doctor more strongly than ever insists on perfect repose."

"And it's little worth his while to make the journey to see *me*," said he, dispiritedly.

"Perhaps he only wants your sanction, your concurrence to something he thinks it wise to do—who knows?"

"Just so, Nelly; who knows? All these weighty speculations entered upon to convert thousands into tens of thousands have no sympathy of mine. I see no object in such wealth. The accumulation of what never spares one a moment for its enjoyment, seems to me as foolish as the act of a man who would pass his life scaling a mountain to obtain a view, and drop down of fatigue before he had once enjoyed it. You and I, I take it, would be satisfied with far humbler fortune?"

"You and I, Gusty," said she, laughingly, "are the ignoble members of this family."

"Then there comes another difficulty; Sedley will at once see that I have not shared my father's confidence, and he will be very cautious about telling me of matters which have not been entrusted to me already."

"Perhaps we are only worrying ourselves for nothing, Gusty. Perhaps there are no secrets after all; or at worst, only those trade secrets which are great mysteries in the counting-house, but have no interest for any not deep in speculation."

"If I only thought so!"

"Have you sufficient confidence in Mr. Cutbill to take him into your counsel? he will be back here to-morrow."

"Scarcely, Nelly. I do not exactly distrust, but I can't say that I like him."

"I hated him at first, but either I have got used to his

vulgarity, or I fancy that he is really good-natured, or, from whatever the cause, I incline to like him better than when he came, and certainly he behaved well to poor Jack."

"Ah, there's another trouble that I have not thought of. Jack, who does not appear to know how ill my poor father is, asks if he could not be induced to write to—somebody—I forget whom, in his behalf. In fact, Nelly, there is not a corner without its special difficulty, and I verily believe there never was a man less made to meet them than myself."

"I'll take as much of the load as I have strength for," said she, quietly.

"I know that; I know it well, Nelly. I can scarcely say what I'd do without you now. Here comes the doctor. I'm very anxious to hear what he'll say this evening."

Belton had made a long visit to the sick-room, and his look was graver than usual as he came down the stairs. "His head is full of business; he will give his brain no respite," said he; "but for that, I'd not call his case hopeless. Would it not be possible to let him suppose that all the important matters which weigh upon him were in safe hands and in good guidance?"

Augustus shook his head doubtingly.

"At least could he not be persuaded to suffer some one—yourself, for example—to take the control of such affairs as require prompt action till such time as he may be able to resume their management himself?"

"I doubt it, doctor; I doubt it much. Men, who, like my father, have had to deal with vast and weighty interests, grow to feel that inexperienced people—of my own stamp for instance—are but sorry substitutes in time of difficulty; and I have more than once heard him say, 'I'd rather lash the tiller and go below, than give over the helm to a bad steersman.'"

"I would begin," continued the doctor, "by forbidding him all access to his letters. You must have seen how nervous and excited he becomes as the hour of the post draws nigh. I think I shall take this responsibility on myself."

"I wish you would."

"He has given me in some degree the opportunity, for he has already asked when he might have strength enough to dictate a letter, and I have replied that I would be guided by the state in which I may find him to-morrow for the answer. My impression is that what he calls a letter is in reality a will. Are you aware whether he has yet made one?"

"I know nothing, absolutely nothing, of my father's affairs."

"The next twelve hours will decide much," said the doctor, as he moved away, and Augustus sat pondering alone over what he had said, and trying to work out in his mind whether his father's secrets involved anything deeper and more serious than the complications of business and the knotty combinations of weighty affairs.

Wearied out—for he had been up the greater part of the night—and fatigued, he fell off at last into a heavy sleep, from which he was awoke by Nelly, who, gently leaning on his shoulder, whispered, "Mr. Sedley has come, Gusty; he is at supper in the oak parlour. I told him I thought you had gone to lie down for an hour, for I knew you were tired."

"No, not tired, Nelly," said he, arousing himself, half-ashamed of being caught asleep. "I came in here to think, and I believe I dropped into a doze. What is he like, this Mr. Sedley? What manner of man is he?"

"He is small and grey, with a slight stoop, and a formal sort of manner. I don't like him. I mean his manner checked and repelled me, and I was glad to get away from him."

"My father thinks highly of his integrity, I know."

"Yes, I am aware of that. He is an excellent person, I believe; rather non-attractive."

"Well," said he, with a half-sigh, "I'll go and see whether my impression of him be the same as yours. Will you come in, Nelly?"

"Not unless you particularly wish it," said she, gravely.

"No; I make no point of it, Nelly. I'll see you again by-and-by."

Augustus found Mr. Sedley over his wine. He had dispatched a hasty meal, and was engaged looking over a mass of papers and letters with which a black leather bag at his side seemed to be filled. After a few words of greeting, received by the visitor with a formal politeness, Augustus proceeded to explain how his father's state precluded all questions of business, and that the injunctions of the doctor were positive on this head.

"His mind is clear, however, isn't it?" asked Sedley.

"Perfectly. He has never wandered, except in the few moments after sleep."

"I take it I shall be permitted to see him?"

"Certainly; if the doctor makes no objection, you shall."

"And possibly, too, I may be allowed to ask him a question

or two? Matters which I know he will be well prepared to answer me."

"I am not so confident about that. Within the last hour Doctor Belton has declared perfect quiet, perfect repose, to be of the utmost importance to my father."

"Is it not possible, Mr. Bramleigh, that I may be able to contribute to this state by setting your father's mind at rest, with reference to what may press very heavily on him?"

"That is more than I can answer," said Augustus, cautiously.

"Well," said Sedley, pushing back his chair from the table, "if I am not permitted to see Colonel Bramleigh, I I shall have made this journey for nothing—without, sir, that you will consent to occupy your father's position, and give your sanction to a line of action?"

"You know my father, Mr. Sedley, and I need not tell you how so presumptuous a step on my part might be resented by him."

"Under ordinary circumstances I am sure he would resent such interference, but here, in the present critical emergency, he might feel—and not without reason, perhaps—more displeased at your want of decision."

"But when I tell you, Mr. Sedley, that I know nothing of business, that I know no more of the share list than I do of Sanscrit, that I never followed the rise and fall of the funds, and am as ignorant of what influences the exchanges as I am of what affects the tides; when I have told you all this, you will, I am sure, see that any opinion of mine must be utterly valueless."

"I don't exactly know, Mr. Bramleigh, that I'd have selected you if I wanted a guide to a great speculation or a large investment; but the business which has brought me down here is not of this nature. It is besides a question as to which, in the common course of events, you might be obliged to determine what line you would adopt. After your father, you are the head of this family, and I think it is time you should learn that you may be called upon to-morrow or next day to defend your right, not only to your property, but to your name."

"For Heaven's sake, what do you mean?"

"Be calm, sir, and grant me a patient hearing, and you shall hear the subject on which I have come to obtain your father's opinion, and failing that, yours—for, as I have said, Mr. Bramleigh, a day or two more may make the case one

for your own decision. And now, without entering into the history of the affair, I will simply say that an old claim against your father's entailed estates has been recently revived, and under circumstances of increased importance; that I have been for some time back in negotiation to arrange this matter by a compromise, and with every hope of success; but that the negotiations have been unexpectedly broken off by the demands of the claimant—demands so far above all calculation, and indeed I may say above all fairness—that I have come over to ask whether your father will accede to them or accept the issue of the law as to his right."

Augustus sat like one stunned by a heavy blow, not utterly unconscious, but so much overcome and so confused that he could not venture to utter a word.

"I see I have shocked you by my news, Mr. Bramleigh, but these are things not to be told by halves."

"I know nothing of all this; I never so much as heard of it," gasped out Augustus. "Tell me all that you know about it."

"That would be a somewhat long story," said the other, smiling, "but I can, in a short space, tell you enough to put the main facts before you, and enable you to see that the case is, with all its difficulties of proof, a very weighty and serious one, and not to be dismissed, as your father once opined, as the mere menace of a needy adventurer."

With as much brevity as the narrative permitted, Sedley told the story of Pracontal's claim. It was, he said, an old demand revived; but under circumstances that showed that the claimant had won over adherents to his cause, and that some men with means to bring the case to trial had espoused his side. Pracontal's father, added he, was easily dealt with; he was a vulgar fellow, of dissipated habits, and wasteful ways; but his taste for plot and intrigue—very serious conspiracies, too, at times—had so much involved him that he was seldom able to show himself, and could only resort to letter-writing to press his demands. In fact, it was always his lot to be in hiding on this charge or that, and the police of half Europe were eager in pursuit of him. With a man so deeply compromised, almost outlawed over the whole Continent, it was not difficult to treat, and it happened more than once that he was for years without anything being heard of him; and, in fact, it was clear that he only preferred his claim as a means of raising a little money, when all other means of obtaining supplies had failed him. At last, news of his death arrived

—he died at Monte Video—and it was at first believed that he had never married, and consequently that his claim, if it deserved such a name, died with him. It was only three years ago, that the demand was revived, and this man, M. Anatole Pracontal as he called himself, using his maternal name, appeared in the field as the rightful owner of the Bramleigh estates.

"Now this man is a very different sort of person from his father. He has been well educated, mixed much with the world, and has the manners and bearing of a gentleman. I have not been able to learn much of his career; but I know that he served as a lieutenant in a French hussar regiment, and subsequently held some sort of employment in Egypt. He has never stooped to employ threat or menace, but frankly appealed to the law to establish his claim, and his solicitor, Kelson, of Furnival's Inn, is one of the most respectable men in the profession."

"You have seen this Monsieur Pracontal yourself?"

"Yes. By a strange accident, I met him at your brother's, Captain Bramleigh's, breakfast table. They had been fellow-travellers, without the slightest suspicion on either side how eventful such a meeting might be. Your brother, of course, could know nothing of Pracontal's pretensions; but Pracontal, when he came to know with whom he had been travelling, must have questioned himself closely as to what might have dropped from him inadvertently."

Augustus leaned his head on his hand in deep thought, and for several minutes was silent. At last he said—"Give me your own opinion, Mr. Sedley—I don't mean your opinion as a lawyer, relying on nice technical questions or minute points of law, but simply your judgment as a man of sound sense, and, above all, of such integrity as I know you to possess—and tell me what do you think of this claim? Is it—in one word, is it founded on right?"

"You are asking too much of me, Mr. Bramleigh. First of all, you ask me to disassociate myself from all the habits and instincts of my daily life, and give you an opinion on a matter of law, based on other rules of evidence than those which alone I suffer myself to be guided by. I only recognize one kind of right, that which the law declares and decrees."

"Is there not such a thing as a moral right?"

"There may be; but we are disputatious enough in this world, with all our artificial aids to some fixity of judgment,

and for Heaven's sake let us not soar up to the realms of morality for our decisions, or we shall bid adieu to guidance for ever."

"I'm not of your mind there, sir. I think it is quite possible to conceive a case in which there could be no doubt on which side lay the right, and not difficult to believe that there are men who would act, on conviction, to their own certain detriment."

"It's a very hopeful view of humanity, Mr. Bramleigh," said the lawyer, and he took a pinch of snuff.

"I am certain it is a just one. At least, I will go this far to sustain my opinion. I will declare to you here, that if the time should ever come that it may depend upon me to decide this matter, if I satisfy my mind that M. Pracontal's claim be just and equitable—that, in fact, he is simply asking for his own—I'll not screen myself behind the law's delays or its niceties; I'll not make it a question of the longest purse or the ablest advocate, but frankly admit that the property is his, and cede it to him."

"I have only one remark to make, Mr. Bramleigh, which is, keep this determination strictly to yourself, and above all things, do not acquaint Colonel Bramleigh with these opinions."

"I suspect that my father is not a stranger to them," said Augustus, reddening with shame and irritation together.

"It is therefore as well, sir, that there is no question of a compromise to lay before you. You are for strict justice and no favour."

"I repeat, Mr. Sedley, I am for him who has the right."

"So am I," quickly responded Sedley; "and we alone differ about the meaning of that word; but let me ask another question. Are you aware that this claim extends to nearly everything you have in the world: that the interest alone on the debt would certainly swallow up all your funded property, and make a great inroad besides on your securities and foreign bonds?"

"I can well believe it," said the other, mournfully.

"I must say, sir," said Sedley, as he rose and proceeded to thrust the papers hurriedly into his bag, "that though I am highly impressed—very highly impressed, indeed, with the noble sentiments you have delivered on this occasion—sentiments, I am bound to admit, that a long professional career has never made me acquainted with till this day—yet.

on the whole, Mr. Bramleigh, looking at the question with a view to its remote consequences, and speculation on what would result if such opinions as yours were to meet a general acceptance, I am bound to say I prefer the verdict of twelve men in a jury-box to the most impartial judgment of any individual breathing; and I wish you a very good-night."

What Mr. Sedley muttered to himself as he ascended the stairs, in what spirit he canvassed the character of Mr. Augustus Bramleigh, the reader need not know; and it is fully as well that our story does not require it should be recorded. One only remark, however, may be preserved: it was said as he reached the door of his room and apparently in a sort of summing up of all that had occurred to him—"These creatures, with their cant about conscience, don't seem to know that this mischievous folly would unsettle half the estates in the kingdom; and there's not a man in England would know what he was born to, till he had got his father in a madhouse."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HOTEL BRISTOL.

In a handsome apartment of the Hôtel Bristol at Paris, sat Lord and Lady Culduff at tea. They were in deep mourning; and though they were perfectly alone, the room was splendidly lighted—branches of candles figuring on every console, and the glass lustre that hung from the ceiling a blaze of waxlights.

If Lord Culduff looked older and more careworn than we have lately seen him, Marion seemed in higher bloom and beauty, and the haughty, half-defiant air which had, in a measure, spoiled the charm of her girlhood, sat with a sort of dignity on her features as a woman.

Not a word was spoken on either side; and from her look of intense preoccupation, as she sat gazing on the broad hem of her handkerchief, it was evident that her thoughts were wandering far away from the place she was in. As they sat thus, the door was noiselessly opened by a servant in deep black, who, in a very subdued voice said, "The Duke de Castro, your Excellency."

"I don't receive," was the cold reply, and the man withdrew. In about a quarter of an hour after, he reappeared, and in the same stealthy tone said, "Madame la Comtesse de Renneville begs she may have the honour——"

"Lady Culduff does not receive," said his lordship, sternly.

"The Countess has been very kind; she has been here to inquire after me several times."

"She is a woman of intense curiosity," said he, slowly.

"I'd have said of great good nature."

"And you'd have said perfectly wrong, madam. The woman is a political *intriguante* who only lives to unravel mysteries; and the one that is now puzzling her is too much for her good manners."

"I declare, my lord, that I do not follow you."

"I'm quite sure of that, madam. The sort of address

Madame de Renneville boasts was not a quality that your life in Ireland was likely to make you familiar with."

"I beg you to remember, my lord," said she, angrily, "that all my experiences of the world have not been derived from that side of the Channel."

"I'm cruel enough to say, madam, that I wish they had! There is nothing so difficult as unlearning."

"I wish, my lord—I heartily wish—that you had made this discovery earlier."

"Madam," said he, slowly, and with much solemnity of manner, "I owe it to each of us to own that I had made what you are pleased to call this 'discovery' while there was yet time to obviate its consequences. My very great admiration had not blinded me as to certain peculiarities, let me call them, of manner; and if my vanity induced me to believe that I should be able to correct them, it is my only error."

"I protest, my lord, if my temper sustain me under such insult as this, I think I might be acquitted of ill breeding."

"I live in the hope, madam, that such a charge would be impossible."

"I suppose you mean," said she, with a sneering smile, "when I have taken more lessons—when I have completed the course of instruction you so courteously began with me yesterday?"

"Precisely, madam, precisely. There are no heaven-born courtiers. The graces of manner are as much matter of acquirement as are the notes of music. A delicate organization has the same disadvantage in the one case that a fine ear has in the other. It substitutes an aptitude for what ought to be pure acquirement. The people who are naturally well mannered are like the people who sing by ear; and I need not say what inflictions are both."

"And you really think, my lord, that I may yet be able to enter a room and leave it with becoming grace and dignity."

"You enter a room well, madam," said he, with a judicial slowness. "Now that you have subdued the triumphant air I objected to, and assumed more quietness—the blended softness with reserve—your approach is good, I should say, extremely good. To withdraw is, however, far more difficult. To throw into the deference of leave-taking—for it is always a permission you seem to ask—the tempered sorrow of departure with the sense of tasted enjoyment, to do this

with ease and elegance, and not a touch of the dramatic about it, is a very high success; and I grieve to say, madam," added he, seriously, "it is a success not yet accorded you. Would you do me the great favour to repeat our lesson of this morning—I mean the curtsey with the two steps retiring, and then the slide?"

"If you do not think me well mannered, my lord, you must at least believe me very good-tempered," said she, flushing.

"Let me assure you, my lady, that to the latter quality I attach no importance whatever. Persons who respect themselves never visit peculiarities of temperament on others. We have our infirmities of nature, as we have our maladies; but we keep them for ourselves, or for our doctor. It is the triumph of the well-bred world to need nothing but good manners."

"What charming people. I take it that heaven must be peopled with lords-in-waiting."

"Let me observe to your ladyship that there is no greater enormity in manners than an epigram. Keep this smartness for correspondence exclusively, abstain from it strictly in conversation."

"I protest, my lord, your lessons come so thick that I despair of being able to profit by half of them. Meanwhile, if I am not committing another solecism against good manners, I should like to say good-night."

Lord Culduff arose and walked to the door, to be ready to open it as she approached. Meanwhile, she busied herself collecting her fan and her scent-bottle and her handkerchief, and a book she had been reading.

"Hadn't Virginie better come for these things?" said he, quietly.

"Oh, certainly," replied she, dropping them hurriedly on the table; "I'm always transgressing; but I do hope, my lord, with time, and with that sincere desire to learn that animates me, I may yet attain to at least so many of the habits of your lordship's order as may enable me to escape censure."

He smiled and bowed a courteous concurrence with the wish, but did not speak. Though her lip now trembled with indignation, and her cheek was flushed, she controlled her temper, and as she drew nigh the door dropped a low and most respectful curtsey.

"Very nice, very nice, indeed; a thought perhaps, too

formal—I mean for the occasion—but in admirable taste. Your ladyship is grace itself."

"My lord, you are a model of courtesy."

"I cannot even attempt to convey what pleasure your words give me," said he, pressing her hand to his heart and bowing low. Meanwhile, with a darkening brow and a look of haughty defiance, she swept past him and left the room.

"Isn't Marion well?" said Temple Bramleigh, as he entered a few minutes later; "her maid told me she had gone to her room."

"Quite well: a little fagged, perhaps, by a day of visiting; nothing beyond that. You have been dining at the embassy? whom had you there?"

"A family party and a few of the smaller diplomacies."

"To be sure. It was Friday. Any news stirring?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Does Bartleton talk of retiring still?"

"Yes. He says he is sick of sending in his demand for retirement. That they always say, 'We can't spare you; you must hold on a little longer. If you go out now, there's Bailey and Hammersmith, and half a dozen others will come insisting on advancement.'"

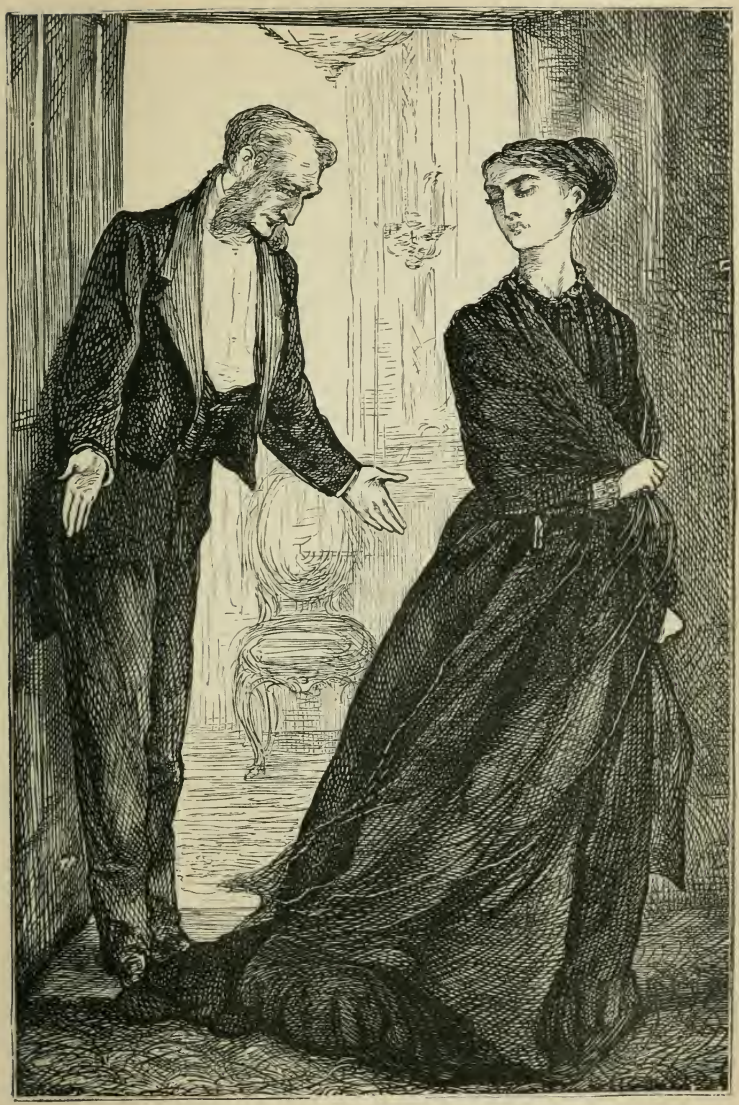
"Didn't he say Culduff too? eh, didn't he?" said the old lord, with a wicked twinkle of the eye.

"I not sure he didn't," said Temple, blushing.

"He did, sir, and he said more—he said, 'Rather than see Culduff here, I'd stay on and serve these twenty years."

"I didn't hear him say that, certainly."

"No, sir, perhaps not, but he said it to himself, as sure as I stand here. There isn't a country in Europe—I say it advisedly—where intellect—I mean superior intellect—is so persistently persecuted as in England. I don't want my enemy to have any heavier misfortune than to be born a man of brains and a Briton! Once that it's known that you stand above your fellow-men, the whole world is arrayed against you. Who knows that better than he who now speaks to you? Have I ever been forgiven the Erzeroum convention? Even George Canning—from whom one might have expected better—even he used to say, 'How well Culduff managed that commercial treaty with the Hanse Towns!' he never got over it, sir, never! You are a young fellow entering upon life—let me give you a word of counsel. Always be inferior to the man you are, for the time being, in contact with. Outbid him, outjockey him, overreach him, but never



"'My Lord, you are a model of courtesy.'"

forget to make him believe he knows more of the game than you do. If you have any success over him, ascribe it to 'luck,' mere 'luck.' The most envious of men will forgive 'luck,' all the more if they despise the fellow who has profited by it. Therefore, I say, if the intellectual standard of your rival is only four feet, take care that with your tallest heels on, you don't stand above three feet eleven! No harm if only three ten and a half."

The little applauding ha! ha! ha! with which his lordship ended, was faintly chorussed by the secretary.

"And what is your news from home; you've had letters, haven't you?"

"Yes. Augustus writes me in great confusion. They have not found the will, and they begin to fear that the very informal scrap of paper I already mentioned is all that represents one."

"What! do you mean that memorandum stating that your father bequeathed all he had to Augustus, and trusted he would make a suitable provision for his brothers and sisters."

"Yes; that is all that has been found. Augustus says in his last letter, my poor father would seem to have been most painfully affected for some time back by a claim put forward to the title of all his landed property, by a person assuming to be the heir of my grandfather, and this claim is actually about to be asserted at law. The weight of this charge and all its consequent publicity and exposure appear to have crushed him for some months before his death, and he had made great efforts to effect a compromise."

A long, low, plaintive whistle from Lord Culduff arrested Temple's speech, and for a few seconds there was a dead silence in the room.

"This, then, would have left you all ruined—eh?" asked Culduff, after a pause.

"I don't exactly see to what extent we should have been liable—whether only the estated property, or also all funded moneys."

"Everything; every stick and stone; every scrip and debenture, you may swear. The rental of the estates for years back would have to be accounted for—with interest."

"Sedley does not say so," said Temple, in a tone of considerable irritation.

"These fellows never do; they always imply there is a game to be played, an issue to be waited for, else their

occupation were gone. How much of all this story was known to your sister Marion?"

"Nothing. Neither she nor any of us ever suspected it."

"It's always the same thing," said the Viscount, as he arose and settled his wig before the glass. "The same episode goes on repeating itself for ever. These trade fortunes are just card-houses; they are raised in a night, and blown away in the morning."

"You forget, my lord, that my father inherited an entailed estate."

"Which turns out not to have been his," replied he, with a grin.

"You are going too fast, my lord, faster than judge and jury. Sedley never took a very serious view of this claim, and he only concurred in the attempt to compromise it out of deference to my father's dislike to public scandal."

"And a very wise antipathy it was, I must say. No gentleman ever consulted his self-respect by inviting the world to criticize his private affairs. And how does this pleasing incident stand now? In which act of the drama are we at this moment? Is there an action at law, or are we in the stage of compromise?"

"This is what Augustus says," said Temple, taking the letter from his pocket and reading: "'Sedley thinks that a handsome offer of a sum down—say twenty thousand pounds—might possibly be accepted; but to meet this would require a united effort by all of us. Would Lord Culduff be disposed to accept his share in this liability? Would he, I mean, be willing to devote a portion of Marion's fortune to this object, seeing that he is now one of us? I have engaged Cutbill to go over to Paris and confer with him, and he will probably arrive there by Tuesday. Nelly has placed at my disposal the only sum over which she has exclusive control—it is but two thousand pounds. As for Jack, matters have gone very ill with him, and rather than accept a court-martial, he has thrown up his commission and left the service. We are expecting him here to-night, but only to say good bye, as he sails for China on Thursday.'"

Lord Culduff walked quietly towards the chimney-piece as Temple concluded, and took up a small tobacco-box of chased silver, from which he proceeded to manufacture a cigarette—a process on which he displayed considerable skill and patience; having lighted which, and taken a couple of puffs, he said, "You'll have to go to Bogotà, Temple, that's clear."

"Go to Bogotà! I declare I don't see why."

"Yes, you'll have to go; every man has to take his turn of some objectionable post, his Gaboon and yellow fever days. I myself passed a year at Stuttgard. The Bramleighs are now events of the past. There's no use in fighting against these things. They were, and they are not: that's the whole story. It's very hard on every one, especially hard upon *me*. Reverses in life sit easily enough on the class that furnishes adventurers, but in *my* condition there are no adventurers. You and others like you descend to the ranks, and nobody thinks the worse of you. *We*—we cannot! that's the pull you have. We are born with our epaulettes, and we must wear them till we die."

"It does not seem a very logical consequence, notwithstanding, to me, that because my brother may have to defend his title to his estate, that I must accept a post that is highly distasteful to me."

"And yet it is the direct consequence. Will you do me the favour to touch that bell. I should like some claret-cup. The fact is, we all of us take too little out of our prosperity! Where we err is, we experiment on good fortune: now we shouldn't do that, we should realize. You, for instance, ought to have made your 'running' while your father was entertaining all the world in Belgravia. The people couldn't have ignored *you*, and dined with *him;* at least, you need not have let them."

"So that your lordship already looks upon us as bygones, as things of the past?"

"I am forced to take this very disagreeable view. Will you try that cup? it is scarcely iced enough for my liking. Have you remarked that they never make cup properly in an hotel? The clubs alone have the secret."

"I suppose you will confer with Cutbill before you return an answer to Augustus?" said Temple, stiffly.

"I may—that is, I may listen to what that very plausible but not very polished individual has to say, before I frame the exact terms of my reply. We are all of us, so to say, *dans des mauvais draps. You* are going where you hate to go, and I, who really should have had no share in this general disaster, have taken my ticket in the lottery when the last prize has just been paid over the counter."

"It is very hard on you indeed," said the other, scornfully.

"Nothing less than your sympathy would make it endur-

able;" and as he spoke he lighted a bedroom candle and moved towards the door. "Don't tell them at F. O. that you are going out unwillingly, or they'll keep you there. Trust to some irregularity when you are there, to get recalled, and be injured. If a man can only be injured and brought before the House, it's worth ten years' active service to him. The first time I was injured I was made secretary of embassy. The second gave me my K.C.B., and I look to my next misfortune for the Grand Cross. Good bye. Don't take the yellow fever, don't marry a squaw."

And with a graceful move of the hand he motioned an adieu, and disappeared.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON THE ROAD.

L'Estrange and his sister were on their way to Italy. The curate had been appointed to the church at Albano, and he was proceeding to his destination with as much happiness as is permitted to a man who, with a very humble opinion of himself, feels calls on to assume a position of some importance.

Wishing, partly from motives of enjoyment, partly from economy, to avoid the route most frequented by travellers, they had taken the road through Zurich and the valley of the Upper Rhine, and had now reached the little village of Dornbirn in the Vorarlberg—a spot of singular beauty, in the midst of a completely pastoral country. High mountains, snow-capped above, pine-clad lower down, descended by grassy slopes into rich pasture-lands, traversed by innumerable streams, and dotted over with those cottages of framed wood, which, with their ornamented gables and quaint galleries, are the most picturesque peasant-houses in existence. Beautiful cattle covered the hills, their tinkling bells ringing out in the clear air, and blending their tones with the ceaseless flow of falling water, imparting just that amount of sound that relieved the solemn character of the scene, and gave it vitality.

Day after day found our two travellers still lingering here. There was a charm in the spot, which each felt, without confessing it to the other, and it was already the fourth evening of their sojourn as they were sitting by the side of a little rivulet, watching the dipping flies along the stream, that Julia said, suddenly,—

"You'd like to live your life here, George; isn't that so?"

"What makes you think so, Julia?" said he, colouring slightly as he spoke.

"First tell me if I have not read you aright? You like this quiet dreamy landscape. You want no other changes

than in the varying effects of cloud, and shadow, and mist; and you'd like to think this a little haven against the storms and shipwrecks of life?"

"And if I really did think all this, would my choice of an existence be a very bad one, Julia?"

"No. Not if one could ensure the same frame of mind in which first he tasted the enjoyment. I, for instance, like what is called the world very much. I like society, life, and gaiety. I like the attentions, I like the flatteries one meets with, but if I could be always as happy, always as tranquil as we have felt since we came here, I'd be quite willing to sign a bond to live and die here."

"So that you mean our present enjoyment of the place could not last."

"I am sure it could not. I am sure a great deal of the pleasure we now feel is in the relief of escaping from the turmoil and bustle of a world that we don't belong to. The first sense of this relief is repose, the next would be ennui."

"I don't agree with you, Julia. There is a calm acceptance of a humble lot in life, quite apart from ennui."

"Don't believe it. There is no such philosophy. A great part of your happiness here is in fact that you can afford to live here. Oh, hold up your hands, and be horrified. It is very shocking to have a sister who will say such vulgar things, but I watched you, George, after you paid the bill this morning, and I marked the delighted smile in which you pointed out some effect of light on the 'Sentis,' and I said to myself, 'It is the landlord has touched up the landscape.'"

"I declare, Julia, you make me angry. Why will you say such things?"

"Why are we so poor, George? Tell me that, brother mine. Why are we so poor?"

"There are hundreds as poor; thousands poorer."

"Perhaps they don't care, don't fret about it, don't dwell on all the things they are debarred from, don't want this or that appliance to make life easier. Now look there, what a difference in one's existence to travel that way."

As she spoke, she pointed to a travelling-carriage which swept over the bridge, with all the speed of four posters, and, with all the clatter of cracking whips and sounding horns, made for the inn of the village.

"How few travel with post now, in these days of railroad," said he, not sorry to turn the conversation into another channel.

"I hope they are going on. I trust they'll not stop here. We have been the great folk of the place up to this, but you'll see how completely the courier or the *femme-de-chambre* will eclipse us now," said she, rising. "Let us go back, or perhaps they'll give our very rooms away."

"How can you be so silly, Julia?"

"All because we are poor, George. Let me be rich, and you'll be surprised, not only how generous I shall be, but how disposed to think well of every one. Poverty is the very mother of distrust."

"I never heard you rail at our narrow fortune like this before."

"Don't be angry with me, dear George, and I'll make a confession to you. I was not thinking of ourselves, nor of our humble lot all this while; it was a letter I got this morning from Nelly Bramleigh was running in my mind. It has never been out of my thoughts since I received it."

"You never told me of this."

"No. She begged of me not to speak of it; and I meant to have obeyed her, but my temper has betrayed me. What Nelly said was, 'Don't tell your brother about these things till he can hear the whole story, which Augustus will write to him as soon as he is able.'"

"What does she allude to?"

"They are ruined—actually ruined."

"The Bramleighs—the rich Bramleighs?"

"Just so. They were worth millions—at least they thought so—a few weeks back, and now they have next to nothing."

"This has come of over-speculation."

"No. Nothing of the kind. It is a claimant to the estate has arisen, an heir whose rights take precedence of their father's; in fact, the grandfather had been privately married early in life, and had a son of whom nothing was heard for years, but who married and left a boy, who, on attaining manhood, preferred his claim to the property. All this mysterious claim was well known to Colonel Bramleigh; indeed, it would appear that for years he was engaged in negotiations with this man's lawyers, sometimes defiantly challenging an appeal to the law, and sometimes entertaining projects of compromise. The correspondence was very lengthy, and, from its nature, must have weighed heavily on the Colonel's mind and spirits, and ended, as Nelly suspects, by breaking up his health.

"It was almost the very first news that met Augustus on his accession to his fortune, and so stunned was he that he wrote to Mr. Sedley to say, 'I have such perfect reliance on both your integrity and ability, that if you assure me this claim is well founded and this demand a just one, I will not contest it.' He added—'I am not afraid of poverty, but a public shame and a scandal would be my death.'"

"Just what I should expect from him. What did Sedley say?"

"He didn't say he was exactly a fool, but something very like it; and he told him, too, that though he might make very light of his own rights, he could not presume to barter away those of others; and, last of all, he added, what he knew would have its weight with Augustus, that, had his father lived, he meant to have compromised this claim. Not that he regarded it either as well founded or formidable, but simply as a means of avoiding a very unpleasant publicity. This last intimation had its effect, and Augustus permitted Sedley to treat. Sedley at once addressed himself to Temple —Jack was not to be found—and to Lord Culduff, to learn what share they were disposed to take in such an arrangement. As Augustus offered to bind himself never to marry, and to make a will dividing the estate equally amongst his brothers and sisters, Lord Culduff and Temple quite approved of this determination, but held that they were not called upon to take any portion of the burden of the compromise.

"Augustus would seem to have been so indignant at this conduct, that he wrote to Sedley to put him at once in direct communication with the claimant. Sedley saw by the terms of the letter how much of it was dictated by passion and offended pride, evaded the demand, and pretended that an arrangement was actually pending, and, if uninterfered with, sure to be completed. To this Augustus replied—for Nelly has sent me a copy of his very words—'Be it so. Make such a settlement, as you, in your capacity of my lawyer, deem best for my interests. For my own part, I will not live in a house, nor receive the rents of an estate, my rights to which the law may possibly decide against me. Till, then, the matter be determined either way, I and my sister Eleanor, who is like-minded with me in this affair, will go where we can live at least cost, decided, as soon as may be, to have this issue determined, and Castello become the possession of him who rightfully owns it.'

"On the evening of the day he wrote this they left Castello. They only stopped a night in Dublin, and left next morning for the Continent. Nelly's letter is dated from Ostend. She says she does not know where they are going, and is averse to anything like importuning her brother by even a question. She promises to write soon again, however, and tell me all about their plans. They are travelling without a servant, and, so far as she knows, with very little money. Poor Nelly! she bears up nobly, but the terrible reverse of condition, and the privations she is hourly confronted with, are clearly preying upon her."

"What a change! Just to think of them a few months back. It was a princely household."

"Just what Nelly says. 'It is complete overthrow; and if I am not stunned by the reverse, it is because all my sympathies are engaged for poor Gusty, who is doing his best to bear up well. As for myself, I never knew how helpless I was till I tried to pack my trunk. I suppose time will soften down many things that are now somewhat hard to bear; but for the moment I am impatient and irritable; and it is only the sight of my dear brother—so calm, so manly, and so dignified in his sorrow—that obliges me to forget my selfish grief and compose myself as I ought.'"

As they thus talked, they arrived at the door of the inn, where the landlord met them, with the request that the two gentlemen, who had arrived by extra-post, and who could not find horses to proceed on their journey, might be permitted to share the one sitting-room the house contained, and which was at present occupied by the L'Estranges.

"Let us sup in your room, George," whispered Julia, and passed on into the house. L'Estrange gave orders to send the supper to his room, and told the landlord that the salon was at his guests' disposal.

About two hours later, as the curate and his sister sat at the open window, silently enjoying the delicious softness of a starry night, they were startled by the loud talking of persons so near as to seem almost in the room with them.

"English—I'll be sworn they are!" said one. "That instinctive dread of a stranger pertains only to our people. How could it have interfered with their comfort, that we sate and ate our meal in this corner?"

"The landlord says they are young, and the woman pretty. That may explain something. Your countrymen, Philip, are the most jealous race in Europe."

L'Estrange coughed here three or four times, to apprise his neighbours that they were within earshot of others.

"Listen to that cough," cried the first speaker. "That was palpably feigned. It was meant to say, 'Don't talk so loud.'"

"I always grow more indiscreet under such provocation," said the other, whose words were slightly tinged with a foreign accent.

A merry laugh burst from Julia at this speech, which the others joined in by very impulse.

"I suspect," said the first speaker, "we might as well have occupied the same room, seeing in what close proximity we stand to each other."

"I think it would be as well to go to your room, Julia," said George, in a low voice. "It is getting late, besides."

"I believe you are right, George. I will say good night."

The last words appeared to have caught the ears of the strangers, who exclaimed together, "Good night, good night;" and he with the foreign accent began to hum, in a very sweet tenor voice, "Buona sera, buona notte, buona sera;" which Julia would fain have listened to, but George hurried her away, and closed the door.

"There is the end of that episode," said the foreign voice. "Le mari jaloux has had enough of us. Your women in England are taught never to play with fire."

"I might reply that yours are all pyrotechnists," said the other, with a laugh.

The clatter of plates and the jingle of glasses, as the waiter laid the table for supper, drowned their voices, and L'Estrange dropped off asleep soon after. A hearty burst of laughter at last aroused him. It came from the adjoining room, where the strangers were still at table, though it was now nigh daybreak.

"Yes," said he of the foreign accent, "I must confess it. I never made a lucky hit in my life without the ungrateful thought of how much luckier it might have been."

"It is your Italian blood has given you that temperament."

"I knew you'd say so, Philip; before my speech was well out, I felt the reply you'd make me. But let me tell you that you English are not a whit more thankful to fortune than we are; but in your matter-of-fact way you accept a benefit as your just due, while we, more conscious of our deservings, always feel that no recompense fully equalled

what we merited. And so it is that ever since that morning at Furnival's Inn, I keep on asking myself, Why twenty thousand? Why not forty—why not twice forty?"

"I was quite prepared for all this. I think I saw the reaction beginning as you signed the paper."

"No, there you wrong me, Philip. I wrote boldly, like a man who felt that he was making a great resolve, and could stand by it. You'd never guess when what you have called 'the reaction' set in."

"I am curious to know when that was."

"I'll tell you. You remember our visit to Castello. You thought it a strange caprice of mine to ask the lawyer whether, now that all was finally settled between us, I might be permitted to see the house—which, as the family had left, could be done without any unpleasantness. I believe my request amused *him* as much as it did *you;* he thought it a strange caprice, but he saw no reason to refuse it, and I saw he smiled as he sat down to write the note to the housekeeper. I have no doubt that he thought, 'It is a gambler's whim; he wants to see the stake he played for, and what he might perhaps have won had he had courage to play out the game.' *You* certainly took that view of it."

The other muttered something like a half assent, and the former speaker continued, "And you were both of you wrong. I wanted to see the finished picture of which I possessed the sketch—the beautiful Flora—whose original was my grandmother. I cannot tell you the intense longing I had to see the features that pertained to one who belonged to me; a man must be as utterly desolate as I am, to comprehend the craving I felt to have something—anything that might stand to me in place of family. It was this led me to Castello, and it was this that made me, when I crossed the threshold, indifferent to all the splendours of the place, and only occupied with one thought, one wish—to see the fresco in the Octagon Tower—poor old Giacomo's great work—the picture of his beautiful daughter. And was she not beautiful? I ask you, Philip, had Raphael himself ever such a model for sweetness of expression? Come, come. You were just as wild as myself in your enthusiasm as you stood before her; and it was only by a silly jest that you could repress the agitation you were so ashamed of."

"I remember I told you that the family had terribly degenerated since her day."

"And yet you tried to trace a likeness between us."

"You won't say that I succeeded," said he, with a laugh.

"It was then as I stood there gazing on her, thinking of her sad story, that I bethought me what an ignoble part it was I played to compromise the rights that she had won, and how unworthy I was to be the descendant of the beautiful Enrichetta."

"You are about the only man I ever met who was in love with his grandmother."

"Call it how you like, her lovely face has never left me since I saw it there."

"And yet your regret implies that you are only sorry not to have made a better bargain."

"No, Philip: my regret is not to have stood out for terms that must have been refused to me; I wish I had asked for the 'impossible.' I tried to make a laughing matter of it when I began, but I cannot—I cannot. I have got the feeling that I have been selling my birthright."

"And you regret that the mess of pottage has not been bigger."

"There's the impossibility in making a friend of an Englishman! It is the sordid side of everything he will insist on turning uppermost. Had I told a Frenchman what I have told you, he would have lent me his whole heart in sympathy."

"To be sure he would. He would have accepted all that stupid sentimentality about your grandmother as refined feeling, and you'd have been blubbering over each other this half-hour."

"If you only knew the sublime project I had. I dare not tell you of it in your miserable spirit of depreciating all that is high in feeling and noble in aspiration. You would ridicule it. Yes, *mon cher*, you would have seen nothing in my plan, save what you could turn into absurdity."

"Let me hear it. I promise you to receive the information with the most distinguished consideration."

"You could not. You could not elevate your mind even to comprehend my motives. What would you have said, if I had gone to this Mr. Bramleigh, and said, Cousin——"

"He is not your cousin, to begin with."

"No matter; one calls every undefined relation cousin. Cousin, I would have said, this house that you live in, these horses that you drive, this plate that you dine off, these spreading lawns and shady woods that lie around, are mine; I am their lawful owner; I am the true heir to

them; and you are nothing—nobody—the son of an illegitimate——"

"I'd say he'd have pitched you out of the window."

"Wait a while; not so fast. Nevertheless, I would have said, Yours is the prescription and the habit. These things have pertained to you since your birth: they are part of you, and you of them. You cannot live without them, because you know no other life than where they enter and mingle; while I, poor and an adventurer, have never tasted luxury, nor had any experiences but of trouble and difficulty. Let us each keep the station to which habit and time have accustomed him. Do you live, as you have ever lived, grand seigneur as you are—rich, honoured, and regarded. I will never dispute your possession nor assail your right. I only ask that you accept me as your relation—a cousin, who has been long absent in remote lands; a traveller, an 'eccentric,' who likes a life of savagery and adventure, and who has come back, after years of exile, to see his family and be with his own. Imagine yourself for an instant to be Bramleigh, and what you would have said to this? Had I simply asked to be one of them, to call them by their Christian names, to be presented to their friends as Cousin Anatole—I ask you now—seriously, what you would have replied to such a noble appeal?"

"I don't know exactly what I should have said, but I think I can tell you what I would have done."

"Well, out with it."

"I'd have sent for the police, and handed you over to the authorities for either a rogue or a madman."

"Bon soir. I wish you a good-night—pleasant dreams, too, if that be possible."

"Don't go. Sit down. The dawn is just breaking, and you know I ordered the horses for the first light."

"I must go into the air then. I must go where I can breathe."

"Take a cigar, and let us talk of something else."

"That is easy enough for *you;* you who treat everything as a mere passing incident, and would make life a series of unconnected episodes. You turn from this to that, just as you taste of this dish and that at dinner; but I, who want to live a life—*entends-tu?*—to live a life: to be to-morrow the successor of myself to-day, to carry with me an identity—how am *I* to practise your philosophy?"

"Here come the horses; and I must say, I am for once

grateful to their jingling bells, helping as they do to drown more nonsense than even you usually give way to."

"How did we ever become friends? Can you explain that to me?"

"I suppose it must have been in one of your lucid moments, Anatole—for you have them at times."

"Ah, I have! But if you're getting complimentary, I'd better be off. Will you look to the bill? And I'll take charge of the baggage."

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE ROAD TO ITALY.

"You'd not guess who our neighbours of last night were, Julia," said L'Estrange, as they sat at breakfast the next morning.

"I need not guess, for I know," said she, laughing. "The fact is, George, my curiosity was so excited to see them that I got up as they were about to start, and though the grey morning was only breaking at the time, there was light enough for me to recognize Mr. Longworth and his French friend, Count Pracontal."

"I know that; but I know more than that, Julia. What do you think of my discovery, when I tell you that this same Count Pracontal in the claimant of the Bramleigh estate?"

"Is it possible?"

"It is beyond a question or a doubt. I was awakened from my sleep last night by their loud talking, and unwittingly made a listener to all they said. I heard the Frenchman deplore how he had ever consented to a compromise of his claim, and then Longworth quizzed him a good deal, and attributed the regret to his not having made a harder bargain. My own conviction is that the man really felt it as a point of honour, and was ashamed at having stooped to accept less than his right."

"So then they have made a compromise, and the Bramleighs are safe?" cried she, eagerly.

"That much seems certain. The Count even spoke of the sum he had received. I did not pay much attention to the amount, but I remember it struck me as being considerable; and he also referred to his having signed some document debarring him, as it seemed, from all renewal of his demand. In a word, as you said just now, the Bramleighs are safe, and the storm that threatened their fate has passed off harmlessly."

"Oh, you have made me so happy, George. I cannot tell you what joy this news is to me. Poor Nelly, in all her sorrow and privation, has never been out of my thoughts since I read her letter."

"I have not told you the strangest part of all—at least, so it certainly seemed to me. This Count Pracontal actually regretted the compromise, as depriving him of a noble opportunity of self-sacrifice. He wished, he said, he could have gone to Augustus Bramleigh, and declared, 'I want none of this wealth. These luxuries and this station are all essential to you, who have been born to them, and regard them as part of your very existence. To me they are no wants—I never knew them. Keep them, therefore, as your own. All I ask is, that you regard me as one of your kindred and your family. Call me cousin—let me be one of you—to come here, under your roof, when fortune goes ill with me.' When he was saying this, Longworth burst out into a coarse laugh, and told him, that if he talked such rotten sentimentality to any sane Englishman, the only impression it would have left would be that he was a consummate knave or an idiot."

"Well, George," asked she, seriously, "that was not the conviction it conveyed to your mind?"

"No, Julia; certainly not; but somehow—perhaps it is my colder northern blood, perhaps it is the cautious reserve of one who has not had enough experience of life—but I own to you I distrust very high-flown declarations, and as a rule I like the men who do generous things, and don't think themselves heroes for doing them."

"Remember, George, it was a Frenchman who spoke thus; and from what I have seen of his nation, I would say that he meant all that he said. These people do the very finest things out of an exalted self-esteem. They carry the point of honour so high that there is no sacrifice they are not capable of making, if it only serve to elevate their opinion of themselves. Their theory is, they belong to the 'great nation,'

and the motives that would do well enough for you or me would be very ignoble springs of action to him whom Providence had blessed with the higher destiny of being born a Frenchman."

"You disparage while you praise them, Julia."

"I do not mean it, then. I would simply say, I believe in all Count Pracontal said, and I give you my reason for the belief."

"How happy it would have made poor Augustus to have been met in this spirit. Why don't these two men know each other?"

"My dear George, the story of life could no more go on than the story of a novel if there was no imbroglio. Take away from the daily course of events all misunderstandings, all sorrows, and all misconceptions, and there would be no call on humanity for acts of energy, or trustfulness, or devotion. We want all these things just that we may surmount them."

Whether he did not fully concur with the theory, or that it puzzled him, L'Estrange made no reply, and soon after left the room to prepare for their departure. And now they went the road up the valley of the Upper Rhine—that wild and beautiful tract, so grand in outline and so rich in colour, that other landscapes seem cold after it. They wound along the Via Mala, and crossed over the Splugen, most picturesque of Alpine passes, and at last reached Chiavenna.

"All this is very enjoyable, George," said Julia, as they strolled carelessly in a trellised vine-walk; "but as I am the courier, and carry the money-sack, it is my painful duty to say, we can't do it much longer. Do you know how much remains in that little bag?"

"A couple of hundred francs perhaps," said he, listlessly.

"Not half that—how could there, you careless creature? You forget all the extravagances we have been committing, and this entire week of unheard-of indulgence."

"I was always 'had up' for my arithmetic at school. Old Hoskins used to say my figures would be the ruin of me."

The tone of honest sorrow in which he said this threw Julia into a fit of laughing.

"Here is the total of our worldly wealth," said she, emptying on a rustic table the leather bag, and running her fingers through a mass of silver in which a few gold coins glittered.

"It seems very little, Julia," said he, despondingly.

"Worse than that. It is less than it looks, George; these tarnished pieces, with a mock air of silver, are of most ignoble origin; they were born copper, and are only silver by courtesy. Let me see what it all makes."

While she was arranging the money in little piles on the table L'Estrange lighted a cigarette, and puffed it in leisurely fashion.

"Julia," said he, at last, "I hope I haven't committed a dreadful folly in that investment of your two thousand. You know I took the shares I told you of?"

"I remember, George, you said so; but has anything occurred to make you augur ill of the enterprise?"

"No; I know no more of it now than on the first day I heard of it. I was dazzled by the splendid promise of twenty per cent. instead of three that you had received heretofore. It seemed to me to be such a paltry fear to hesitate about doing what scores of others were venturing. I felt as if I were turning away from a big fence while half the field were ready to ride at it. In fact, I made it a question of courage, Julia, which was all the more inexcusable as the money I was risking was not my own."

"Oh, George, you must not say that to me."

"Well well, I know what I think of myself, and I promise you it is not the more favourable because of your generosity."

"My dear George, that is a word that ought never to occur between us. Our interests are inseparable. When you have done what you believed was the best for me there is no question of anything more. There now, don't worry yourself further about it. Attend to what I have to say to you here. We have just one hundred and twelve francs to carry us to Milan, where our letter of credit will meet us; so that there must be no more boat-excursions; no little picnics, with a dainty basket sent up the mountain at sunrise; none of that charming liberality which lights up the road with pleasant faces, and sets one a-thinking how happy Dives might have been if he had given something better than crumbs to Lazarus. No, this must be what you used to call a week of cold-mutton days, mind that, and resist all temptation to money-spending."

L'Estrange bowed his head in quiet acquiescence; his was the sad thought that so many of us have felt; how much of enjoyment life shows us, just one hair's breadth beyond our

power to grasp; vistas of lovely scenery that we are never to visit; glimpses of bliss closed to us even as we catch them; strains of delicious music of which all our efforts can but retain the dying cadences. Not that he felt all these in any bitterness of spirit; even in narrowed fortune life was very pleasant to him, and he was thoroughly, heartily grateful for the path fate had assigned him to walk in.

How would they have liked to have lingered in the Brianza, that one lovely bit of thoroughly rural Italy, with the green of the west blending through all the gorgeous glow of tropical vegetation; how gladly they would have loitered on the lake at Como—the brightest spot of landscape in Europe; with what enjoyment had they halted at Milan, and still more in Florence! Stern necessity, however, whispered ever onwards; and all the seductions of Raffaels and Titians yielded before the hard demands of that fate that draws the purse-strings. Even at Rome they did not venture to delay, consoling themselves with the thought that they were to dwell so near, they could visit it at will. At last they reached Albano, and as they drove into the village caught sight of a most picturesque little cottage, enshrined in a copse of vines. It was apparently untenanted, and they eagerly asked if it were to be let. The answer was, No, it was waiting for the "Prete Inglese," who was daily expected to arrive.

"Oh, George, it is ours," cried Julia, in ecstasy, and hid her head on his shoulder, and actually cried with excess of delight.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CHURCH PATRONS AT ALBANO.

The patrons of the English chapel at Albano were the three great leaders of society in Rome in winter, and at Albano during the summer. Of these the first was Lady Augusta Bramleigh; next came Sir Marcus Cluff; and last—not indeed, either in activity or zeal—was Mrs. Trumpler, a widow-lady of considerable fortune, and no small share of energy in her nature.

To these George L'Estrange had brought formal letters of introduction, which he was cautiously enjoined should be presented in the order of their respective ranks—making his first approaches to the Lady Augusta. To his request to know at what hour he might have the honour to wait on her ladyship, came a few lines on the back of his own card, saying, "Two o'clock, and be punctual." There did not seem to be any unnecessary courtesy in this curt intimation; but he dressed himself carefully for the interview, and with his cravat properly arranged by Julia, who passed his whole appearance in review, he set out for the pretty Villa of the Chestnuts, where her ladyship lived.

"I don't suppose that I'm about to do anything very unworthy, Julia," said he, as he bade her good bye; "but I assure you I feel lower in my own esteem this morning than I have known myself since—since——"

"Since you tumbled over the sunk fence, perhaps," said she, laughing, and turned back into the house.

L'Estrange soon found himself at the gate of the villa, and was conducted by a servant in deep mourning through a very beautiful garden to a small kiosk, or summerhouse, where a breakfast-table was spread. He was punctual to the moment; but as her ladyship had not yet appeared he had ample time to admire the beauty of the Sévres cups of a pale blue, and the rich carving of the silver service—evidently of antique mould, and by a master hand. The rare exotics which were disposed on every side, amongst which

some birds of bright plumage were encaged, seemed to fill up the measure of this luxurious spot, and impressed him with—he knew not what exalted idea of her who should be its mistress.

He waited, at first patiently enough—there was much to interest and amuse him; but at last, as nigh an hour had elapsed, and she had not appeared, a feeling, half of irritation at the thought of neglect, and half doubt lest he should have mistaken what the servant said, began to worry and distress him. A little pendule on a bracket played a few bars of a waltz, and struck three. Should he wait any longer? was the question he put to himself. His sense of shame on leaving home at the thought of presenting himself before a patron came back upon him now with redoubled force. He had often felt that the ministers who preached for a call were submitting themselves to a very unworthy ordeal. The being judged by those they were appointed to teach seemed in itself little short of an outrage; but the part he was now playing was infinitely worse; he had actually come to show himself, to see if, when looked at and talked to, her ladyship would condescend to be his patron, and as it were to impress the indignity more strongly upon him he was kept waiting like a lacquey!

"I don't think I ought to stoop to this," muttered he bitterly to himself; and taking a card and a pencil from his pocket, he wrote: "The Rev. George L'Estrange has waited from two to three o'clock in the hope of seeing Lady Augusta Bramleigh; he regrets the disappointment, as well as his inability to prolong his attendance." "There," cried he aloud, "I hope that will do!" and he placed the card conspicuously on the table.

"Do what, pray?" said a very soft voice, as a slight figure in deep mourning swept noiselessly into the kiosk, and taking the card up sat down without reading it.

One glance showed that the handsome woman before him was Lady Augusta, and the bashful curate blushed deeply at the awkwardness of his position.

"Mr. L'Estrange, I presume?" said she, waving her hand to him to be seated. "And what is your card to do; not represent you, I hope, for I'd rather see you in person?"

"In my despair of seeing your ladyship I wrote a line to say—to say"—and he blundered and stopped short.

"To say you'd wait no longer," said she, smiling; "but how touchy you must be. Don't you know that women have

the privilege of unpunctuality? don't you know it is one of the few prerogatives you men have spared them? Have you breakfasted?"

"Yes—some hours ago."

"I forget whether I have not also. I rather think I did take some coffee. I have been very impatient for your coming. Sit here, please," said she, pointing to an arm-chair beside her own sofa. "I have been very impatient indeed to see you. I want to hear all about these poor Bramleighs; you lived beside them, didn't you, and knew them all intimately? What is this terrible story of their ruin? this claim to their property? What does it mean? is there really anything in it?"

"It is somewhat of a long story," began L'Estrange.

"Then don't tell it, I entreat you. Are you married, Mr. L'Estrange?"

"No, madam, I have not that happiness," said he, smiling at the strange abruptness of her manner.

"Oh, I am so glad," she cried; "so glad! I'm not afraid of a parson, but I positively dread a parson's wife. The parson has occasionally a little tolerance for a number of things he doesn't exactly like; his wife never forgives them; and then a woman takes such exact measure of another woman's meanings, and a man knows nothing about them at all: that on the whole I'm delighted you are single, and I fervently trust you will remain so. Will you promise me as much? will you give me your word not to marry till I leave this?"

"I need scarcely pledge myself, madam, to that; my narrow fortune binds me whether I would or not."

"And you have your mother with you, haven't you?"

"No, madam; my sister has accompanied me."

"I wish it had been your mother. I do so like the maternal pride of a dear old lady in her fine handsome son. Isn't she vain of you? By the way, how did your choice fall upon the Church? You look more like a cavalry officer. I'm certain you ride well."

"It is, perhaps, the only accomplishment I possess in the world," said he, with some warmth of manner.

"I'm delighted to hear that you're a horseman. There's a mare of mine become perfectly impossible. A stupid creature I took as groom hurt her mouth with a severe bit, and she rears now at the slighest touch. Couldn't you do something with her? Pray do; and in return I'll take you some charming rides over the Campagna. There's a little valley—

almost a glen—near this, which I may say I discovered myself. You mustn't be afraid of bad tongues because you ride out with me. Mrs. Trumpler will of course take it up. She's odious—perfectly odious. You haven't seen her yet, but you'll have to call on her; she contributes a thousand francs a year to the church, and must not be neglected. And then there's old Sir Marcus Cluff—don't forget him; and take care to remember that his mother was Lady Marion Otley, and don't remember that his father was Cluff and Gosler, the famous fishmonger. I protest I'm becoming as scandalous as Mrs. Trumpler herself. And mind that you come back and tell when you've seen these people what they said to you, and what you said to them, and whether they abused me. Come to tea, or, if you like better, come and dine to-morrow at six, and I'll call on your mother in the meanwhile and ask her—though I'd rather you'd come alone."

"It is my sister, madam, that is with me," said he, with great difficulty refraining from a burst of laughter.

"Well, and I've said I'd visit her, though I'm not fond of women, and I believe they never like me."

L'Estrange blundered out some stupid compliment about her having in recompense abundant admiration from the other sex, and she laughed, and said, "Perhaps so. Indeed, I believe I am rather a favourite; but with clever men—not with the fools. You'll see that *they* avoid me. And so," said she, drawing a deep sigh, "you really can tell me nothing about these Bramleighs? And all this time I have been reckoning on your coming to hear everything, and to know about the will. Up to this hour, I am totally ignorant as to how I am left. Isn't that very dreadful?"

"It is very distressing indeed, madam."

"The Colonel always said he'd insert a clause or a something or other against my marrying again. Can you imagine anything so ungenerous? It's unchristian, actually unchristian—isn't it?"

A slight gesture seemed to say that he agreed with her; but she was for once determined to be answered more definitely, and she said, "I'm sure, as a clergyman, you can say if there's anything in the Bible against my having another husband?"

"I'm certain there is not, madam."

"How nice it is in the Church of Rome that when there's anything you want to do, and it's not quite right to do it, you can have a dispensation—that is, the Pope can make it per-

fectly moral and proper, and legal besides. Protestantism is so narrow—terribly narrow. As the dear Monsignore Balbi said to me the other night, it is a long 'Act of Parliament against sin.' Wasn't that neat? They are so clever!"

"I am so new to Italy, madam, that I have no acquaintance with these gentlemen."

"I know you'll like them when you do know them; they are so gentle and so persuasive—I might say so fascinating. I assure you, Mr. L'Estrange, I ran a very great risk of going over, as it is called. Indeed, the *Osservatore Romano* said I had gone over; but that is at least premature. These are things one cannot do without long and deep reflection, and intense self-examination—don't you think so. And the dear old Cardinal Bottesini, who used to come to us every Friday evening, warned me himself against my impulsiveness; and then poor Colonel Bramleigh"—here she raised her handkerchief to her eyes—"he wouldn't hear of it at all; he was so devotedly attached to me—it was positive love in a man of his mould—that the thought of my being lost to him, as he called it, was maddening; and in fact he—he made it downright impossible—impossible!" And at last she paused, and a very painful expression in her face showed that her thoughts at the moment were far from pleasurable. "Where was I? what was it I was going to say?" resumed she, hurriedly. "Oh, I remember, I was going to tell you that you must on no account 'go over,' and therefore, avoid of all things what they call the 'controversy' here; don't read their little books, and never make close friendships with the Monsignori. You're a young man, and naturally enough would feel flattered at their attentions, and all the social attractions they'd surround you with. Of course you know nothing of life, and that is the very thing they do understand; and perhaps it is not right of me to say it—it's like a treason—but the women, the great leaders of society, aid them powerfully. They'd like to bring you over," said she, raising her glass and looking at him. "You'd really look remarkably well in a chasuble and a cope. They'd positively fight for you as a domestic chaplain"—and the thought so amused her that she laughed outright, and L'Estrange himself joined her. "I hope I have not wearied you with my cautions and my warnings; but really, when I thought how utterly alone and friendless you must be here, nobody to consult with, none to advise you—for, after all, your mother could scarcely be an efficient guide in such difficulties—I felt

it would be cruel not to come to your aid. Have you got a watch? I don't trust that little pendule, though it plays a delicious 'Ave Maria' of Rossini's. What hour is it?"

"Half-past four, madam. I am really shocked at the length of my visit."

"Well, I must go away. Perhaps you'll come and see my sister—she's charming, I assure you, and she'd like to know you?"

"If you will vouchsafe to present me on any other day, I shall be but too grateful; but Sir Marcus Cluff gave me a rendezvous for four o'clock."

"And you'll be with him at five," cried she, laughing. "Don't say it was I that made you break your appointment, for he hates me, and would never forgive you. By-by. Tell your mother I'll call on her to-morrow, and hope you'll both dine with me." And without waiting for a word in reply, she tripped out of the summer-house, and hastened away to the villa.

L'Estrange had little time to think over this somewhat strange interview when he reached the entrance-gate to the grounds of Sir Marcus Cluff, and was scarcely admitted within the precincts when a phaeton and a pair of very diminutive ponies drove up, and a thin, emaciated man, carefully swathed in shawls and wrappers, who held the reins, called out, "Is that Mr. L'Estrange?"

The young parson came forward with his excuses for being late, and begged that he might not interrupt Sir Marcus in his intended drive.

"Will you take a turn with me?" said Sir Marcus, in a whining voice, that sounded like habitual complaint. "I'm obliged to do this every day; it's the doctor's order. He says, 'Take the air and distract yourself;' and I do so." L'Estrange had now seated himself, and they drove away.

"I'm glad you've come," said Sir Marcus. "It will stop all this plotting and intriguing. If you had delayed much longer, I think they'd have had a dozen here—one of them a converted Jew, a very dirty fellow. O dear, how fatiguing it is! that little crop-eared pony pulls so he can't be held, and we call him John Bright; but don't mention it. I hope you have no family, sir?"

"I have my sister only."

"A sister isn't so bad. A sister may marry, or she may——" What was the other alternative did not appear, for John Bright bolted at this moment, and it was full five

minutes ere he could be pulled up again. "This is the distraction I'm promised," said the sick man. "If it wasn't for Mr. Needham—I call the near-sider Mr. Needham, as I bought him of that gentleman—I'd have too much distraction; but Needham never runs away—he falls; he comes down as if he was shot!" cried he, with a joyous twinkle of the eye, "and I bought him for that. There's no drag ever was invented like a horse on his belly—the most inveterate runaway can't escape against that." If the little cackle that followed this speech did not sound exactly like a laugh, it was all of that emotion that Sir Marcus ever permitted himself.

"I can't ask you if you like this place. You're too newly come to answer that question," resumed he; "but I may ask what is the sort of society you prefer?"

"I've seen next to nothing of the world since I left the University. I have been living these last four or five years in one of the least visited spots in Great Britain, and only since the arrival of the Bramleigh family had a neighbour to speak to."

"Ah, then, you know these Bramleighs?" said the other, with more animation than he had yet displayed. "Overbearing people, I've heard they were—very rich, and insolent to a degree."

"I must say I have found them everything that was kind and considerate, hospitable neighbours, and very warm-hearted friends."

"That's not the world's judgment on them, my dear sir—far from it. They are a proverb for pretension and impertinence. As for Lady Augusta here—to be sure she's only one of them by marriage—but there's not a soul in the place she has not outraged. She goes nowhere—of course, *that* she has a right to do—but she never returns a call, never even sends a card. She went so far as to tell Mr. Pemberton, your predecessor here, that she liked Albano for its savagery; that there was no one to know was its chief charm for her."

"I saw her for the first time this morning," said L'Estrange, not liking to involve himself in this censure.

"And she fascinated you, of course? I'm told she does that with every good-looking young fellow that comes in her way. She's a finished coquette, they say. I don't know what that means, nor do I believe it would have much success with me if I did know. All the coquetry she bestows upon me is to set my ponies off in full gallop whenever she overtakes me driving. She starts away in a sharp canter

just behind me, and John Bright fancies it a race, and away he goes too, and if Mr. Needham was of the same mettle I don't know what would become of us. I'm afraid, besides, she's a connection of mine. My mother, Lady Marion, was cousin to one of the Delahunts of Kings Cromer. Would you mind taking the reins for awhile, John is fearfully rash to-day? Just sit where you are, the near-side gives you the whip-hand for Needham. Ah! that's a relief! Turn down the next road on your left. And so she never asked you about your tenets—never inquired whether you were High Church or Low Church or no church at all?"

"Pardon me, Sir Marcus; she was particularly anxious that I should guard myself against Romish fascinations and advances."

"Ah, she knows them all! They thought they had secured her—indeed they were full sure of it; but as she said to poor Mr. Pemberton, they found they had hatched a duck. She was only flirting with Rome. The woman would flirt with the Holy Father, sir, if she had a chance. There's nothing serious, nothing real, nothing honest about her; but she charmed *you*, for all that—I see it. I see it all; and you're to take moonlight rides with her over the Campagna. Ha, ha, ha! Haven't I hit it? Poor old Pemberton—fifty-eight if he was an hour—got a bad bronchitis with these same night excursions. Worse than that, he made the place too hot for him. Mrs. Trumpler—an active woman Mrs. T., and the eye of a hawk—wouldn't stand the 'few sweet moments,' as poor Pemberton in his simplicity called them. She threatened him with a general meeting, and a vote of censure, and a letter to the Bishop of Gibraltar; and she frightened him so that he resigned. I was away at the time at the baths at Ischia, or I'd have tried to patch up matters. Indeed, as I told Mrs. T., I'd have tried to get rid of my lady, instead of banishing poor Pemberton, as kind-hearted a creature as ever I met, and a capital whist-player. Not one of your new-fangled fellows, with the 'call for trumps' and all the last devices of the Portland, but a steady player, who never varied—didn't go chopping about, changing his suits, and making false leads, but went manfully through his hearts before he opened his spades. We were at Christ Church together. I knew him for a matter of six-and-thirty years, Mr. L'Estrange, and I pledge you my word of honour" —here his voice grew tremulous with agitation—"and in all that time I never knew him revoke!" He drew his hat over

his eyes as he spoke, and leaning back in the seat seemed almost overcome by his emotions.

"Will you turn in there at the small gate? It is a private entrance to my grounds. I'll not ask you to come in to-day, sir. I'm a little flurried and nervous; but if you'll join a sick man's dinner at two o'clock to-morrow—some rice and a chicken and a bit of fish—nothing more, I promise you. Well, well, I see it does not tempt you. My best thanks for your pleasant company. Let me see you soon. Take care of yourself, beware of my lady, and avoid the moonlight!"

Apparently this little sally seemed to revive the invalid, for he stepped up the approach to his house with a lively air and waved his hand pleasantly as he said adieu.

"There's another still!" muttered L'Estrange as he inquired the way to Mrs. Trumpler's; "and I wish with all my heart it was over."

L'Estrange found Mrs. Trumpler at tea. She was an early diner, and took tea about six o'clock, after which she went out for an evening drive over the Campagna. In aspect, the lady was not prepossessing. She was very red-faced, with large grizzly curls arranged in a straight line across her forehead, and she wore spectacles of such a size as to give her somewhat the look of an owl. In figure, she was portly and stout, and had a stand-up sort of air, that, to a timid or bashful man, like the curate, was the reverse of reassuring.

"I perceive, sir, I am the last on your list," said she, looking at her watch as he entered. "It is past six."

"I regret, madam, if I have come at an inconvenient hour. Will you allow me to wait on you to-morrow?"

"No, sir. We will, with your permission, avail ourselves of the present to make acquaintance with each other." She rang the bell after this speech, and ordered that the carriage should be sent away. "I shall not drive, Giacomo," said she; "and I do not receive if any one calls."

"You brought me a letter, sir, from the Reverend Silas Smallwood," said she, very much in the tone of a barrister cross-examining a troublesome witness.

"Yes, madam; that gentleman kindly offered a friend of mine to be the means of presenting me to you."

"So that you are not personally acquainted, sir?"

"We have never, so far as I know, even seen each other."

"It is as well, sir, fully as well. Mr. Smallwood is a person for whose judgment or discrimination I would have the very humblest opinion, and I have therefore, from what

you tell me, the hope that you are not of his party in the Church."

"I am unable to answer you, madam, knowing nothing whatever of Mr. Smallwood's peculiar views."

"This is fencing, sir; and I don't admire fencing. Let us understand each other. What have you come here to preach? I hope my question is a direct one?"

"I am an ordained minister of the Church of England, madam; and when I have said so, I have answered you."

"What, sir? do you imagine your reply is sufficient in an age when not alone every doctrine is embraced within the Church, but that there is a very large and increasing party who are prepared to have no doctrine at all? I perceive, sir, I must make my approaches to you in a different fashion. Are you a man of vestments, gesticulations, and glass windows? Do you dramatize your Christianity?"

"I believe I can say no, madam, to all these."

"Are you a Literalist, then? What about Noah, sir? Let me hear what you have to say about the Flood. Have you ever calculated what forty days' rainfall would amount to? Do you know that in Assam, where the rains are the heaviest in that part of the world, and in Colon, in Central America, no twelve hours' rain ever passed five inches and three quarters? You are, I am sure, acquainted with Eschschormes' book on the Nile deposits? If not, sir, it is yonder—at your service. Now, sir, we shall devote this evening to the Deluge, and, so far as time permits, the age of the earth. To-morrow evening we'll take Moses, on Staub's suggestion that many persons were included under that name. We'll keep the Pentateuch for Friday, for I expect the Rabbi Bensi will be here by that time."

"Will you pardon me, madam," said L'Estrange, rising, "if I decline entering upon all discussion of these momentous questions with you? I have no such scholarship as would enable me to prove instructive, and I have conviction sufficiently strong, in my faith in other men's learning, to enable me to reject quibbles and be unmoved by subtleties. Besides," added he, in a sharper tone, "I have come here to have the honour of making your acquaintance, and not to submit myself to an examination. May I wish you a good evening?"

How he took his leave, how he descended the stairs, and rushed into the street, and found his way to the little inn where his sister wearily was waiting dinner for him, the poor curate never knew to the last day of his life.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SMALL LODGING AT LOUVAIN.

In a very humble quarter of the old town of Louvain, at the corner of La Rue des Moines, Augustus Bramleigh and his sister had taken up their lodgings. Madame Jervasse, the proprietress of the house, had in her youth been the *femme-de-chambre* of some high-born dame of Brussels, and offered her services in the same capacity to Ellen, while, with the aid of her own servant, she prepared their meals, thus at once supplying the modest requirements they needed. Augustus Bramleigh was not a very resolute or determined man, but his was one of those natures that acquire solidity from pressure. When once he found himself on the road of sacrifices, his self-esteem imparted vigour and energy to his character. In the ordinary course of events he was accustomed to hold himself—his abilities and his temperament—cheaply enough. No man was ever less self-opinionated or self-confident. If referred to for advice, or even for opinion, he would modestly decline the last, and say, "Marion or Temple perhaps could help you here." He shrank from all self-assertion whatever, and it was ever a most painful moment to him when he was presented to any one as the future head of the house and the heir to the Bramleigh estates. To Ellen, from whom he had no secrets, he had often confessed how he wished he had been a younger son. All his tastes and all his likings were those to be enjoyed by a man of moderate fortune, and an ambition even smaller than that fortune. He would say, too, half-jestingly, "With such aspiring spirits amongst us as Marion and Temple, I can afford myself the luxury of obscurity. *They* are sure to carry our banner loftily, and *I* may with safety go on my humble path unnoticed."

Jack had always been his favourite brother: his joyous nature, his sailor-like frankness, his spirit, and his willingness to oblige, contrasted very favourably with Temple's sedate, cautious manner, and the traces of a selfishness that never forgot itself. Had Jack been the second son instead

of the youngest, Augustus would have abdicated in his favour at once, but he could not make such a sacrifice for Temple. All the less that the very astute diplomatist continually harped on the sort of qualities which were required to dispense an ample fortune, and more than insinuated how much such a position would become himself, while another might only regard it as a burden and a worry. It was certainly a great shock to him to learn that there was a claimant to his family fortune and estate: the terrible feeling that they were to appear before the world as impostors—holding a station and dispensing a wealth to which they had no right—almost overcame him. The disgrace of a public exposure, the notoriety it would evoke, were about the most poignant sufferings such a man could be brought to endure. He to whom a newspaper comment, a mere passing notice of his name, was a source of pain and annoyance; that he should figure in a great trial, and his downfall be made the theme of moral reflections in a leading article! How was this to be borne? What could break the fall from a position of affluence and power to a condition of penury and insignificance? Nothing—if not the spirit which, by meeting disaster half-way, seemed at least to accept the inevitable with courage, and so carry a high heart in the last moments of defeat.

Augustus well knew what a mistaken estimate the world had ever formed of his timid, bashful nature, and this had given his manner a semblance of pride and hauteur which made the keynote of his character. It was all in vain that he tried to persuade people that he had not an immeasurable self-conceit. They saw it in his every word and gesture, in his coolness when they approached him, in his almost ungraciousness when they were courteous to him. "Many will doubtless declare," said he, "that this reverse of fortune is but a natural justice on one who plumed himself too much on his prosperity, and who arrogated too far on the accident of his wealth. If so, I can but say they will not judge me fairly. They will know nothing of where my real suffering lies. It is less the loss of fortune I deplore, than the world's judgment on having so long usurped that we had no right to."

From the day he read Sedley's letter and held that conversation with the lawyer, in which he heard that the claimant's case seemed a very strong one, and that perhaps the Bramleighs had nothing to oppose to it of so much weight as the great fact of possession—from that hour he took a despairing

view of the case. There are men who at the first reverse of fortune throw down their cards and confess themselves beaten. There are men who can accept defeat itself better than meet the vacillating events of a changeful destiny; who have no persistence in their courage, nor any resources to meet the coming incidents of life. Augustus Bramleigh possessed a great share of this temperament. It is true that Sedley, after much persuasion, induced him to entertain the idea of a compromise, carefully avoiding the use of that unhappy word, and substituting for it the less obnoxious expression "arrangement." Now this same arrangement, as Mr. Sedley put it, was a matter which concerned the Bramleighs collectively—seeing that if the family estates were to be taken away, nothing would remain to furnish a provision for younger children. "You must ascertain what your brothers will do," wrote Sedley; "you must inquire how far Lord Culduff—who through his marriage has a rent-charge on the estate—will be willing to contribute to an 'arrangement.'"

Nothing could be less encouraging than the answer this appeal called forth. Lord Culduff wrote back in the tone of an injured man, all but declaring that he had been regularly taken in; indeed, he did not scruple to aver that it had never been his intention to embark in a ship that was sure to founder, and he threw out something like a rebuke on the indelicacy of asking him to add to the sacrifice he had already made for the honour of being allied to them.

Temple's note ran thus:—

"Dear Gusty,—If your annoyances have not affected your brain, I am at a loss for an explanation of your last letter. How, I would ask you, is a poor secretary of legation to subsist on the beggarly pittance F. O. affords him? Four hundred and fifty per annum is to supply rent, clothes, club expenses, a stall at the opera, and one's little charities in perhaps one of the dearest capitals in Europe. So far from expecting the demands you have made upon me, I actually, at the moment of receiving yours, had a half-finished note on my writing-table asking you to increase my poor allowance. When I left Castello, I think you had sixteen horses. Can you possibly want more than two for the carriage and one for your own riding? As to your garden and greenhouse expenses, I'll lay ten to one your first peas cost you a guinea a quart, and you never saw a pine at your table under five-

and-twenty pounds; and now that I am on the theme of reduction, I would ask what do you want with a chef at two hundred and fifty a year? Do you, or does Ellen, ever eat of anything but the simplest diet at table? Don't you send away the entrées every day, wait for the roast gigot, or the turkey, or the woodcocks, and in consequence, does not M. Grégoire leave the cookery to be done by one of his 'aides,' and betake himself to the healthful pursuit of snipe-shooting, and the evening delight of Mrs. Somebody's tea at Portshannon? Why not add this useless extravagance to the condemned list of the vineries, the stables, and the score of other extraordinaries, which an energetic hand would reduce in half an hour?

"I'm sure you'll not take it in ill part that I bring these things under your notice. Whether out of the balance in hand you will give me five hundred a year, or only three, I shall ever remain

"Your affectionate brother,
"TEMPLE EDGERTON BRAMLEIGH."

"Read that, Nelly," said Augustus, as he threw it across the table. "I'm almost afraid to say what I think of it."

This was said as they sat in their little lodgings in the Rue des Moines: for the letter had been sent through an embassy bag, and consequently had been weeks on the road, besides lying a month on a tray in the Foreign Office till some idle lounger had taken the caprice to forward it.

"Her Majesty's Legation at Naples. Lord Culduff is there special, and Temple is acting as secretary to him."

"And does Marion send no message?"

"Oh, yes. She wants all the trunks and carriage-boxes which she left at Castello to be forwarded to town for transmission abroad. I don't think she remembers us much further. She hopes I will not have her old mare sold, but make arrangements for her having a free paddock for the rest of her life, and she adds that you ought to take the pattern of the slipper on her side-saddle, for if it should happen that you ever ride again, you'll find it better than any they make now."

"Considerate, at all events. They tell us that love alone remembers trifles. Isn't this a proof of it, Gusty?"

"Read Temple now, and try to put me in better temper with him than I feel at this moment."

"I couldn't feel angry with Temple," said she, quietly.

"All he does and all he says so palpably springs from consideration of self, that it would be unjust to resent in him what one would not endure from another. In fact, he means no harm to any one, and a great deal of good to Temple Bramleigh."

"And you think that commendable?"

"I have not said so; but it certainly would not irritate me."

She opened the letter after this and read it over leisurely.

"Well, and what do you say now, Nelly?" asked he.

"That it's Temple all over; he does not know why in this shipwreck every one is not helping to make a lifeboat for him. It seems such an obvious and natural thing to do that he regards the omission as scarcely credible."

"Does he not see—does he not care for the ruin that has overtaken us?"

"Yes, he sees it, and is very sorry for it, but he opines, at the same time, that the smallest amount of the disaster should fall to his share. Here's something very different," said she, taking a letter from her pocket. "This is from Julia. She writes from her little villa at Albano, and asks us to come and stay with them."

"How thoroughly kind and good-natured."

"Was it not, Gusty? She goes over how we are to be lodged, and is full of little plans of pleasure and enjoyment; she adds too, what a benefit you would be to poor George, who is driven half wild with the meddlesome interference of the Church magnates. They dictate to him in everything, and a Mrs. Trumpler actually sends him the texts on which she desires him to hold forth,—while Lady Augusta persecutes him with projects in which theological discussion, as she understands it, is to be carried on in rides over the Campagna, and picnics to the hills behind Albano. Julia says that he will not be able to bear it, without the comfort and companionship of some kind friend, to whom he can have recourse in his moments of difficulty."

"It would be delightful to go there, Nelly, but it is impossible."

"I know it is," said she, gravely.

"We could not remove so far from England while this affair is yet undetermined. We must remain where we can communicate easily with Sedley."

"There are scores of reasons against the project," said she, in the same grave tone. "Let us not speak of it more."

Augustus looked at her, but she turned away her face and he could only mark that her cheeks and throat were covered with a deep blush.

"This part of Julia's letter is very curious," said she, turning to the last page. "They were stopping at a little inn one night where Pracontal and Longworth arrived, and George by a mere accident heard Pracontal declare that he would have given anything to have known you personally, that he desired above everything to be received by you on terms of friendship, and even of kindred; that the whole of this unhappy business could have been settled amicably, and in fact, he never ceased to blame himself for the line into which his lawyer's advice had led him, while all his wishes tended to an opposite direction."

"But Sedley says he has accepted the arrangement, and abandoned all claim in future."

"So he has, and it is for that he blames himself. He says it debars him from the noble part he desired to take."

"I was no part to this compromise, Nelly, remember that. I yielded to reiterated entreaty a most unwilling assent, declaring always that the law must decide the case between us, and the rightful owner have his own. Let not Mr. Pracontal imagine that all the high-principled action is on his side: from the very first I declared that I would not enjoy for an hour what I did not regard undisputably as my own. You can bear witness to this, Nelly. I simply assented to the arrangement, as they called it, to avoid unnecessary scandal. What the law shall decide between us, need call forth no evil passions or ill-will. If the fortune we had believed our own belongs to another, let him have it."

The tone of high excitement in which he spoke plainly revealed how far a nervous temperament and a susceptible nature had to do with his present resolve. Nelly had seen this before, but never so fully revealed as now. She knew well the springs which could move him to acts of self-sacrifice and devotion, but she had not thoroughly realized to herself that it was in a paroxysm of honourable emotion he had determined to accept the reverse of fortune, which would leave him penniless in the world.

"No, Nelly!" said he, as he arose and walked the room, with head erect, and a firm step. "We shall not suffer these people who talk slightingly of the newly risen gentry to have their scoff unchallenged! It is the cant of the day to talk of mercantile honour and City notions of what is high-minded

and right, and I shall show them that *we*—'Lombard Street people,' as some newspaper scribe called us the other day—that we can do things the proudest earl in the peerage would shrink back from as from a sacrifice he could not dare to face. There can be no sneer at a class that can produce men who accept beggary rather than dishonour. As that Frenchman said, these habits of luxury and splendour were things he had never known—the want of them would leave no blank in *his* existence. Whereas to us they were the daily accidents of life—they entered into our ways and habits, and made part of our very natures; giving them up was like giving up ourselves, surrendering an actual identity! You saw our distinguished connection, Lord Culduff, how he replied to my letter—a letter, by the way, I should never have stooped to write—but Sedley had my ear at the time and influenced me against my own convictions. The noble Viscount, however, was free from all extraneous pressure, and he told us as plainly as words could tell it, that he had paid heavily enough already for the honour of being connected with us, and had no intention to contribute another sacrifice. As for Temple—I won't speak of him: poor Jack, how differently he would have behaved in such a crisis."

Happy at the opportunity to draw her brother away, even passingly, from a theme that seemed to press upon him unceasingly, she drew from the drawer of a little work-table a small photograph, and handed it to him, saying, "Is it not like?"

"Jack!" cried he. "In a sailor's jacket too! what is this?"

"He goes out as a mate to China," said she, calmly. "He wrote me but half a dozen lines, but they were full of hope and cheerfulness; he said that he had every prospect of getting a ship, when he was once out; that an old messmate had written to his father—a great merchant at Shanghai—about him, and that he had not the slightest fears for his future."

"Would any one believe in a reverse so complete as this?" cried Augustus, as he clasped his hands before him. "Who ever heard of such ruin in so short a time?"

"Jack certainly takes no despairing view of life," said she, quietly.

"What! does he pretend to say it is nothing to descend from his rank as an officer of the navy, with a brilliant prospect before him, and an affluent connection at his back, to be a common sailor, or at best one grade removed from a common sailor, and his whole family beggared? Is this the picture

he can afford to look on with pleasure or with hope! The man who sees in his downfall no sacrifice, or no degradation, has no sympathy of mine. To tell me that he is stout-hearted is absurd, he is simply unfeeling."

Nelly's face and even her neck became crimson, and her eyes flashed indignantly; but she repressed the passionate words that were almost on her lips, and taking the photograph from him replaced it in the drawer and turned the key.

"Has Marion written to you?" asked he, after a pause.

"Only a few lines. I'm afraid she's not very happy in her exalted condition after all, for she concluded with these words: 'It is a cruel blow that has befallen you, but don't fancy that there are not miseries as hard to bear in life as those which display themselves in public and flaunt their sufferings before the world.'"

"That old fop's temper perhaps is hard to bear with," said he, carelessly.

"You must write to George L'Estrange, Gusty," said she, coaxingly. "There are no letters he likes so much as yours. He says you are the only one who ever knew how to advise without taking that tone of superiority that is so offensive, and he needs advice just now—he is driven half wild with dictation and interference."

She talked on in this strain for some time, till he grew gradually calmer, and his features, losing their look of intensity and eagerness, regained their ordinary expression of gentleness and quiet.

"Do you know what was passing through my mind just now?" said he, smiling half sadly. "I was wishing it was George had been Marion's husband instead of Lord Culduff. We'd have been so united, the very narrowness of our fortunes would have banded us more closely together, and I believe, firmly believe, we might have been happier in these days of humble condition, than ever we were in our palmy ones: do you agree with me, Nelly?"

Her face was now crimson, and if Augustus had not been the least observant of men, he must have seen how his words had agitated her. She merely said, with affected indifference, "Who can tell how these things would turn out? There's a nice gleam of sunlight, Gusty. Let us have a walk. I'll go for my hat."

She fled from the room before he had time to reply, and the heavy clap of a door soon told that she had reached her chamber.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AT LOUVAIN.

THERE are few delusions more common with well-to-do people than the belief that if "put to it" they could earn their own livelihood in a variety of ways. Almost every man has some two or three or more accomplishments which he fancies would be quite adequate to his support, and remembering with what success the exercise of these gifts has ever been hailed in the society of his friends, he has a sort of generous dislike to be obliged to eclipse some poor drudge of a professional, who, of course, will be consigned to utter oblivion after his own performance.

Augustus Bramleigh was certainly not a conceited, or a vain man, and yet he had often in his palmy days imagined how easy it would be for him to provide for his own support; he was something of a musician, he sang pleasingly, he drew a little, he knew something of three or four modern languages, he had that sort of smattering acquaintance with questions of religion, politics, and literature, which the world calls being "well-informed;" and yet nothing short of grave Necessity revealed to him that, towards the object of securing a livelihood, a cobbler in his bulk was out and out his master.

The world has no need of the man of small acquirements, and would rather have its shoes mended by the veriest botch of a professional than by the cleverest amateur that ever studied a Greek sandal.

"Is it not strange, Nelly, that Brydges and Bowes won't take those songs of mine," said he one morning as the post brought him several letters. "They say they are very pretty, and the accompaniments full of taste, but so evidently wanting in originality—such palpable imitations of Gordigiani and Mariani—they would meet no success. I ask you, Nelly, am I the man to pilfer from any one. Is it likely I would trade on another man's intellect?"

"That you certainly are not, Gusty! but remember who

it is that utters this criticism. The man who has no other test of goodness but a ready sale, and he sees in this case little hope of such."

"Rankin, too, refuses my 'Ghost Story;' he calls it too German, whatever that may mean."

"It means simply that he wants to say something and is not very clear what it ought to be. And your water-colour sketch—the Street in Bruges?"

"Worst of all," cried he, interrupting. "Dinetti, with whom I have squandered hundreds for prints and drawings, sends it backs with these words in red chalk on the back;—"No distance; no transparency; general muddiness—a bad imitation of Prout's worst manner."

"How unmannerly; how coarse!"

"Yes; these purveyors to the world's taste don't mince matters with their journeymen. They remind them pretty plainly of their shortcomings; but considering how much of pure opinion must enter into these things, they might have uttered their judgments with more diffidence."

"They may not always know what is best, Gusty; but I take it, they can guess very correctly as to what the public will think best."

"How humiliating it makes labour when one has to work to please a popular taste. I always had fancied that the author, or the painter, or the musician, stood on a sort of pedestal, to the foot of which came the publisher, entreating that he might be permitted to catch the utterings of genius, and become the channel through which they should flow into an expectant world; and now I see it is the music-seller, or the print-seller is on the pedestal, and the man of genius kneels at his feet and prays to be patronized."

"I am sure, Gusty," said she, drawing her arm within his, as he stood at the window, "I am sure we must have friends who would find you some employment in the public service that you would not dislike, and you would even take interest in. Let us see first what we could ask for."

"No; first let us think of whom we could ask for it."

"Well, be it so. There is Sir Francis Deighton; isn't he a Cabinet Minister?"

"Yes. My father gave him his first rise in life; but I'm not sure they kept up much intimacy later on."

"I'll write to him, Gusty; he has all the Colonial patronage, and could easily make you governor of something to-morrow. Say 'yes;' tell me I may write to him."

"It's not a pleasant task to assign you, dear Nelly," said he, with a sad smile: "and yet I feel you will do it better than I should."

"I shall write," said she, boldly, "with the full assurance that Sir Francis will be well pleased to have an opportunity to serve the son of an old friend and benefactor."

"Perhaps it is that my late defeats have made me cowardly—but I own, Nelly, I am less than hopeful of success."

"And I am full of confidence. Shall I show you my letter when I have written it?"

"Better not, Nelly. I might begin to question the prudence of this, or the taste of that, and end by asking you to suppress it all. Do what you like then, and in your own way."

Nelly was not sorry to obtain permission to act free of all trammels, and went off to her room to write her letter. It was not till after many attempts that she succeeded in framing an epistle to her satisfaction. She did not wish—while reminding Sir Francis of whom it was she was speaking—to recall to him any unpleasant sentiment of an old obligation; she simply adverted to her father's long friendship for him, but dropped no hint of his once patronage. She spoke of their reverse in fortune with dignity, and in the spirit of one who could declare proudly that their decline in station involved no loss of honour, and she asked that some employment might be bestowed on her brother, as upon one well deserving of such a charge.

"I hope there is nothing of the suppliant in all this? I hope it is such a note as Gusty would have approved of, and that my eagerness to succeed has involved me in no undue humility." Again and again she read it over; revising this, and changing that, till at length grown impatient, she folded it up and addressed it, saying aloud: "There! it is in the chance humour of him who reads, not in the skill of the writer, lies the luck of such epistles."

"You forgot to call him Right Honourable, Nelly," said Augustus, as he looked at the superscription.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten more than that, Gusty; but let us hope for the best."

"What did you ask for?"

"Anything—whatever he can give you, and is disposed to give, I've said. We are in that category where the proverb says—there is no choice."

"I'd not have said that, Nelly."

"I know that, and it is precisely on that account that I said it for you. Remember, Gusty, you changed our last fifty pounds in the world yesterday."

"That's true," said he, sitting down near the table, and covering his face with both hands.

"There's a gentleman below stairs, madam, wishes to know if he could see Mr. Bramleigh," said the landlady, entering the room.

"Do you know his name?" said Nelly, seeing that as her brother paid no attention to the announcement, it might be as well not to admit a visitor.

"This is his card, madam."

"Mr. Cutbill!" said Nelly, reading aloud. "Gusty," added she, bending over him, and whispering in his ear, "would you see Mr. Cutbill?"

"I don't care to see him," muttered he, and then rising he added, "Well, let him come up; but mind, Nelly, we must on no account ask him to stay and dine with us."

She nodded assent, and the landlady retired to introduce the stranger.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MR. CUTBILL'S VISIT.

"If you knew the work I had to find you," said Mr. Cutbill, entering the room and throwing his hat carelessly on a table. "I had the whole police at work to look you up, and only succeeded at last by the half-hint that you were a great political offender, and Lord Palmerston would never forgive the authorities if they concealed you."

"I declare," said Augustus, gravely, "I am much flattered by all the trouble you have taken to blacken my character."

"Character! bless your heart, so long as you ain't a Frenchman, these people don't care about your character. An English conspirator is the most harmless of all creatures. Had you been a Pole or an Italian, the préfet told me, he'd have known every act of your daily life."

"And so we shall have to leave this, now?" said Ellen, with some vexation in her tone.

"Not a bit of it, if you don't dislike the surveillance they'll bestow on you; and it'll be the very best protection against rogues and pickpockets; and I'll go and say that you're not the man I suspected at all."

"Pray take no further trouble on our behalf, sir," said Bramleigh, stiffly and haughtily.

"Which being interpreted means—make your visit as short as may be, and go your way, Tom Cutbill—don't it?"

"I am not prepared to say, sir, that I have yet guessed the object of your coming."

"If you go to that, I suspect I'll be as much puzzled as yourself. I came to see you because I heard you were in my neighbourhood. I don't think I had any other very pressing reason. I had to decamp from England somewhat hurriedly, and I came over here to be, as they call it, 'out of the way,' till this storm blows over."

"What storm? I've heard nothing of a storm."

"You've not heard that the Lisconnor scheme has blown up?—the great Culduff Mining Company has exploded, and blown all the shareholders skyhigh?"

"Not a word of it."

"Why, there's more writs after the promoters this morning than ever there was scrip for paid-up capital. We're all in for it—every man of us."

"Was it a mere bubble then—a fraud?"

"I don't know what you call a bubble, or what you mean by a fraud. We had all that constitutes a company: we had a scheme and we had a lord. If an over-greedy public wants grandeur and gain besides, it must be disappointed; as I told the general meeting, 'You don't expect profit as well as the peerage, do you?'"

"You yourself told me there was coal."

"So there was. I am ready to maintain it still. Isn't that money, Bramleigh?" said he, taking a handful of silver from his pocket; "good coin of the realm, with her Majesty's image? But if you asked me if there was much more where it came from—why, the witness might, as the newspapers say, hesitate and show confusion."

"You mean then, in short, there was only coal enough to form a pretext for a company?"

"I tell you what I mean," said Cutbill, sturdily. "I bolted from London rather than be stuck in a witness-box and badgered by a cross-examining barrister, and I'm not going to expose myself to the same sort of diversion here from you."

"I assure you, sir, the matter had no interest for me, beyond the opportunity it afforded you of exculpation."

"For the exculpatory part, I can take it easy," said Cutbill, with a dry laugh. "I wish I had nothing heavier on my heart than the load of my conscience; but I've been signing my name to deeds, and writing Tom Cutbill across acceptances, in a sort of indiscriminate way, that in the calmer hours before a Commissioner in Bankruptcy ain't so pleasant. I must say, Bramleigh, your distinguished relative, Culduff, doesn't cut up well."

"I think, Mr. Cutbill, if you have any complaint to make of Lord Culduff, you might have chosen a more fitting auditor than his brother-in-law."

"I thought the world had outgrown the cant of connection. I thought that we had got to be so widely-minded that you might talk to a man about his sister as freely as if she were the Queen of Sheba."

"Pray do me the favour to believe me still a bigot, sir."

"How far is Lord Culduff involved in the mishap you

speak of, Mr. Cutbill?" said Nelly, with a courteousness of tone she hoped might restore their guest to a better humour.

"I think he'll net some five-and-twenty thousand out of the transaction; and from what I know of the distinguished Viscount, he'll not lie awake at night fretting over the misfortunes of Tom Cutbill and fellows."

"Will this—this misadventure," stammered out Augustus, "prevent your return to England?"

"Only for a season. A man lies by for these things, just as he does for a thunderstorm; a little patience and the sun shines out, and he walks about freely as ever. If it were not, besides, for this sort of thing, we City men would never have a day's recreation in life; nothing but work, work, from morning till night. How many of us would see Switzerland, I ask you, if we didn't smash? The Insolvent Court is the way to the Rhine, Bramleigh, take my word for it, though it ain't set down in John Murray."

"If a light heart could help to a light conscience, I must say, Mr. Cutbill, you would appear to possess that enviable lot."

"There's such a thing as a very small conscience," said Cutbill, closing one eye, and looking intensely roguish. "A conscience so unobtrusive that one can treat it like a poor relation, and put it anywhere."

"Oh, Mr. Cutbill, you shock me," said Ellen, trying to look reproachful and grave.

"I'm sorry for it, Miss Bramleigh," said he, with mock sorrow in his manner.

"Had not our friend L'Estrange an interest in this unfortunate speculation?" asked Bramleigh.

"A trifle; a mere trifle. Two thousand I think it was. Two, or two-five-hundred. I forget exactly which."

"And is this entirely lost?"

"Well, pretty much the same: they talk of sevenpence dividend, but I suspect they're over-sanguine. I'd say five was nearer the mark."

"Do they know the extent of their misfortune?" asked Ellen, eagerly.

"If they read the *Times* they're sure to see it. The money article is awfully candid, and never attempts any delicate concealment like the reports in a police-court. The fact is, Miss Bramleigh, the financial people always end like Cremorne, with a 'grand transparency' that displays the whole company!"

"I'm so sorry for the L'Estranges," said Ellen, feelingly

"And why not sorry for Tom Cutbill, miss? Why have no compassion for that gifted creature, and generous mortal, whose worst fault was that he believed in a lord?"

"Mr. Cutbill is so sure to sympathize with himself and his own griefs that he has no need of me; and then he looks so like one that would have recuperative powers."

"There you've hit it," cried he, enthusiastically. "That's it! that's what makes Tom Cutbill the man he is—*flectes non frangis*. I hope I have it right; but I mean you may smooth him down but you can't smash him; and it's to tell the noble Viscount as much I'm now on my way to Italy. I'll say to the distinguished peer, 'I'm only a pawn on the chess-board; but look to it, my lord, or I'll give check to the king!' Won't he understand me? ay, in a second too!"

"I trust something can be done for poor L'Estrange," said Augustus. "It was his sister's fortune; and the whole of it, too."

"Leave that to me, then. I'll make better terms for him than he'll get by the assignee under the court. Bless your heart, Bramleigh, if it wasn't for a little 'extramural equity,' as one might call it, it would go very hard with the widow and the orphan in this world; but we, coarse-minded fellows, as I've no doubt you'd call us, we do kinder things in our own way than commissioners under the act."

"Can you recover the money for them?" asked Augustus, earnestly; "can you do that?"

"Not legally—not a chance of it; but I think I'll make a noble lord of our acquaintance disgorge something handsome. I don't mean to press any claim of my own. If he behaves politely, and asks me to dine, and treats me like a gentleman, I'll not be over hard with him. I like the—not the conveniences—that's not the word, but the——"

"'Convenances,' perhaps," interposed Ellen.

"That's it—the convenances. I like the attentions that seem to say, 'T. C. isn't to be kept in a tunnel or a cutting; but is good company at table, with long-necked bottles beside him. T. C. can be talked to about the world: about pale sherry, and pretty women, and the delights of Homburg, and the odds on the Derby; he's as much at home at Belgravia as on an embankment."

"I suspect there will be few to dispute that," said Augustus, solemnly.

"Not when they knows it, Bramleigh; 'not when they knows it,' as the cabbies say. The thing is to make them

know it, to make them feel it. There's a rough-and-ready way of putting all men like myself, who take liberties with the letter H, down as snobs; but you see there's snobs and snobs. There's snobs that are only snobs; there's snobs that have nothing distinctive about them but their snobbery, and there's snobs so well up in life, so shrewd, such downright keen men of the world, that their snobbery is only an accident, like a splash from a passing 'bus, and, in fact, their snobbery puts a sort of accent on their acuteness, just like a trade-mark, and tells you it was town-made—no bad thing, Bramleigh, when that town calls itself London!"

If Augustus vouchsafed little approval of this speech, Ellen smiled an apparent concurrence, while in reality it was the man's pretension and assurance that amused her.

"You ain't as jolly as you used to be; how is that?" said Cutbill, shaking Bramleigh jocosely by the arm. "I suspect you are disposed, like Jeremiah, to a melancholy line of life?"

"I was not aware, sir, that my spirits could be matter of remark," said Augustus, haughtily.

"And why not? You're no highness, royal or serene, that one is obliged to accept any humour you may be in, as the right thing. You are one of *us*, I take it."

"A very proud distinction," said he, gravely.

"Well, if it's nothing to crow, it's nothing to cry for! If the world had nothing but top-sawyers, Bramleigh, there would be precious little work done. Is that clock of yours, yonder, right—is it so late as that?"

"I believe so," said Augustus, looking at his watch. "I want exactly ten minutes to four."

"And the train starts at four precisely. That's so like me. I've lost my train, all for the sake of paying a visit to people who wished me at the North Pole for my politeness."

"Oh, Mr. Cutbill," said Ellen, deprecatingly.

"I hope, Mr. Cutbill, we are fully sensible of the courtesy that suggested your call."

"And *I'm* fully sensible that you and Miss Ellen have been on thorns for the last half-hour, each muttering to himself, 'What will he say next?' or worse than that, 'When will he go?'"

"I protest, sir, you are alike unjust to yourself and to us. We are so thoroughly satisfied that you never intended to hurt us, that if incidentally touched, we take it as a mere accident."

"That is quite the case, Mr. Cutbill," broke in Nelly; "and we know besides, that, if you had anything harsh or severe to say to us, it is not likely you'd take such a time as this to say it."

"You do me proud, ma'am," said Cutbill, who was not quite sure whether he was complimented or reprimanded.

"Do, please, Augustus; I beg of you do," whispered Nelly in her brother's ear.

"You've already missed your train for us, Mr. Cutbill," said Augustus; "will you add another sacrifice and come and eat a very humble dinner with us at six o'clock?"

"Will I? I raythor think I will," cried he, joyfully. "Now that the crisis is over, I may as well tell you I've been angling for that invitation for the last half-hour, saying every minute to myself, 'Now it's coming,' or 'No, it ain't.' Twice you were on the brink of it, Bramleigh, and you drifted away again, and at last I began to think I'd be driven to my lonely cutlet at the 'Leopold's Arms. You said six; so I'll just finish a couple of letters for the post, and be here sharp. Good bye. Many thanks for the invite, though it was pretty long a-coming." And with this he waved an adieu and departed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN EVENING WITH CUTBILL.

When Nelly retired after dinner on that day, leaving Mr. Cutbill to the enjoyment of his wine—an indulgence she well knew he would not willingly forego—that worthy individual drew one chair to his side to support his arm, and resting his legs on another exclaimed, "Now, this is what I call cosy. There's a pleasant light, a nice bit of view out of that window, and as good a bottle of St. Julien as a man may desire."

"I wish I could offer you something better," began Augustus, but Cutbill stopped him at once, saying,—

"Taking the time of the year into account, there's nothing better! It's not the season for a Burgundy or even a full-bodied claret. Shall I tell you, Bramleigh, that you gave me a better dinner to-day than I got at your great house, the Bishop's Folly."

"We were very vain of our cook, notwithstanding, in those days," said Augustus, smiling.

"So you might. I suppose he was as good as money could buy—and you had plenty of money. But your dinners were grand, cumbrous, never-ending feeds, that with all the care a man might bestow on the bill o' fare, he was sure to eat too much of venison curry after he had taken mutton twice, and pheasant following after fat chickens. I always thought your big dinners were upside down; if one could have had the tail-end first they'd have been excellent. Somehow, I fancy it was only your brother Temple took an interest in these things at your house. Where is he now?"

"He's at Rome with my brother-in-law."

"That's exactly the company he ought to keep. A lord purifies the air for him, and I don't think his constitution could stand without one."

"My brother has seen a good deal of the world; and, I think, understands it tolerably well," said Bramleigh, meaning so much of rebuke to the other's impertinence as he could force himself to bestow on a guest.

"He knows as much about life as a dog knows about decimals. He knows the cad's life of fetch and carry; how to bow himself into a room and out again; when to smile, and when to snigger; how to look profound when a great man talks, and a mild despair when he is silent; but that ain't life, Bramleigh, any more than these strawberries are grapes from Fontainebleau!"

"You occasionally forget, Mr. Cutbill, that a man's brother is not exactly the public."

"Perhaps I do. I only had one brother, and a greater blackguard never existed; and the *Times* took care to remind me of the fact every year till he was transported; but no one ever saw me lose temper about it."

"I can admire if I cannot envy your philosophy."

"It's not philosophy at all; it's just common sense, learned in the only school for that commodity in Europe—the City of London. We don't make Latin verses as well as you at Eton or Rugby, but we begin life somewhat 'cuter than you, notwithstanding. If we speculate on events, it is not like theoretical politicians, but like practical people, who know that Cabinet Councils decide the funds, and the funds make fortunes. *You* and the men like you advocated a free Greece and a united Italy for sake of fine traditions. *We* don't care a rush about Homer or Dante, but we want to sell pig-iron and printed calicos. Do you see the difference now?"

"If I do, it's with no shame for the part you assign us."

"That's as it may be. There may be up there amongst the stars a planet where your ideas would be the right thing. Maybe Doctor Cumming knows of such a place. I can only say Tom Cutbill doesn't, nor don't want to."

For a while neither spoke a word; the conversation had taken a half irritable tone, and it was not easy to say how it was to be turned into a pleasanter channel.

"Any news of Jack?" asked Cutbill, suddenly.

"Nothing since he sailed."

Another and a longer pause ensued, and it was evident neither knew how to break the silence.

"These ain't bad cigars," said Cutbill, knocking the ash off his cheroot with his finger. "You get them here?"

"Yes; they are very cheap."

"Thirty, or thirty-five centimes?"

"Ten!"

"Well, it ain't dear! Ten centimes is a penny—a trifle

less than a penny. And now, Bramleigh, will you think it a great liberty of me, if I ask you a question—a sort of personal question?"

"That will pretty much depend upon the question, Mr. Cutbill. There are matters, I must confess, I would rather not be questioned on."

"Well, I suppose I must take my chance for that! If you are disposed to bristle up, and play porcupine because I want to approach you, it can't be helped—better men than Tom Cutbill have paid for looking into a wasp's nest. It's no idle curiosity prompts my inquiry, though I won't deny there is a spice of curiosity urging me on at this moment. Am I free to go on, eh?"

"I must leave you to your own discretion, sir."

"The devil a worse guide ever you'd leave me to. It is about as humble a member of the Cutbill family as I'm acquainted with. So that without any reference to my discretion at all, here's what I want. I want to know how it is that you've left a princely house, with plenty of servants and all the luxuries of life, to come and live in a shabby corner of an obscure town and smoke penny cigars? There's the riddle I want you to solve for me."

For some seconds Bramleigh's confusion and displeasure seemed to master him completely, making all reply impossible; but at last he regained a degree of calm, and with a voice slightly agitated, said, "I am sorry to baulk your very natural curiosity, Mr. Cutbill, but the matter on which you seek to be informed is one strictly personal and private."

"That's exactly why I'm pushing for the explanation," resumed the other, with the coolest imaginable manner. "If it was a public event I'd have no need to ask to be enlightened."

Bramleigh winced under this rejoinder, and a slight contortion of the face showed what his self-control was costing him.

Cutbill, however, went on, "When they told me, at the Gresham, that there was a man setting up a claim to your property, and that you declared you'd not live in the house, nor draw a shilling from the estate, till you were well assured it was your own beyond dispute, my answer was, 'No son of old Montagu Bramleigh ever said that. Whatever you may say of that family, they're no fools.'"

"And is it with fools you would class the man who rea-

soned in this fashion?" said Augustus, who tried to smile and seem indifferent as he spoke.

"First of all, it's not reasoning at all; the man who began to doubt whether he had a valid right to what he possessed might doubt whether he had a right to his own name—whether his wife was his own, and what not. Don't you see where all this would lead to? If I have to report whether a new line is safe and fit to be opened for public traffic, I don't sink shafts down to see if some hundred fathoms below there might be an extinct volcano, or a stratum of unsound pudding-stone. I only want to know that the rails will carry so many tons of merchandise. Do you see my point?—do you take me, Bramleigh?"

"Mr. Cutbill," said Augustus, slowly, "on matters such as these you have just alluded to there is no man's opinion I should prefer to yours, but there are other questions on which I would rather rely upon my own judgment. May I beg, therefore, that we should turn to some other topic."

"It's true, then—the report was well-founded?" cried Cutbill, staring in wild astonishment at the other's face.

"And if it were, sir," said Bramleigh, haughtily, "what then?"

"What then? Simply that you'd be the—no matter what. Your father was very angry with me one night, because I said something of the same kind to him."

And as he spoke he pushed his glass impatiently from him, and looked ineffably annoyed and disgusted.

"Will you not take more wine, Mr. Cutbill?" said Augustus, blandly, and without the faintest sign of irritation.

"No; not a drop. I'm sorry I've taken so much. I began by filling my glass whenever I saw the decanter near me—thinking, like a confounded fool as I was, we were in for a quiet confidential talk, and knowing that I was just the sort of fellow a man of your own stamp needs and requires; a fellow who does nothing from the claims of a class—do you understand?—nothing because he mixes with a certain set and dines at a certain club; but acts independent of all extraneous pressure—a bit of masonry, Bramleigh, that wants no buttress. Can you follow me, eh?"

"I believe I can appreciate the strength of such a character as you describe."

"No, you can't, not a bit of it. Some flighty fool that would tell you what a fine creature you were, how great-

hearted—that's the cant, great-hearted!—would have far more of your esteem and admiration than Tom Cutbill, with his keen knowledge of life and his thorough insight into men and manners."

"You are unjust to each of us," said Bramleigh, quietly.

"Well, let us have done with it. I'll go and ask Miss Ellen for a cup of tea, and then I'll take my leave. I'm sure I wish I'd never have come here. It's enough to provoke a better temper than mine. And now let me just ask you, out of mere curiosity—for of course I mustn't presume to feel more—but just out of curiosity let me ask you, do you know an art or an industry, a trade or a calling, that would bring you in fifty pounds a year? Do you see your way to earning the rent of a lodging even as modest as this?"

"That is exactly one of the points on which your advice would be very valuable to me, Mr. Cutbill."

"Nothing of the kind. I could no more tell a man of your stamp how to gain his livelihood than I could make a tunnel with a corkscrew. I know your theory well enough. I've heard it announced a thousand times and more. Every fellow with a silk lining to his coat and a taste for fancy jewellery imagines he has only to go to Australia to make a fortune; that when he has done with Bond Street he can take to the bush. Isn't that it, Bramleigh—eh? You fancy you're up to roughing it and hard work because you have walked four hours through the stubble after the partridges, or sat a 'sharp thing' across country in a red coat! Heaven help you! It isn't with five courses and finger-glasses a man finishes his day at Warra-Warra."

"I assure you, Mr. Cutbill, as regards my own case, I neither take a high estimate of my own capacity nor a low one of the difficulty of earning a living."

"Humility never paid a butcher's bill, any more than conceit!" retorted the inexorable Cutbill, who seemed bent on opposing everything. "Have you thought of nothing you could do? for, if you're utterly incapable, there's nothing for you but the public service."

"Perhaps that is the career would best suit me," said Bramleigh, smiling; "and I have already written to bespeak the kind influence of an old friend of my father's on my behalf."

"Who is he?"

"Sir Francis Deighton."

"The greatest humbug in the Government! He trades on being the most popular man of his day, because he never refused anything to anybody—so far as a promise went; but it's well known that he never gave anything out of his own connections. Don't depend on Sir Francis, Bramleigh, whatever you do."

"That is sorry comfort you give me."

"Don't you know any women?"

"Women—women? I know several."

"I mean women of fashion. Those meddlesome women that are always dabbling in politics and the Stock Exchange —very deep where you think they know nothing, and perfectly ignorant about what they pretend to know best. They've two-thirds of the patronage of every government in England, you may laugh; but it's true."

"Come, Mr. Cutbill, if you'll not take more wine we'll join my sister," said Bramleigh, with a faint smile.

"Get them to make you a Commissioner—it doesn't matter of what—Woods and Forests—Bankruptcy—Lunacy—anything; it's always two thousand a year, and little to do for it. And if you can't be a Commissioner be an Inspector, and then you have your travelling expenses;" and Cutbill winked knowingly as he spoke, and sauntered away to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE APPOINTMENT.

"What will Mr. Cutbill say now?" cried Ellen, as she stood leaning on her brother's shoulder while he read a letter marked "On Her Majesty's Service," and sealed with a prodigious extravagance of wax. It ran thus:—

"Downing Street, Sept. 10th.

"Sir,

"I have received instructions from Sir Francis Deighton, Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, to acknowledge your letter of the 9th instant; and while expressing his regret that he has not at this moment any post in his department which he could offer for your acceptance, to state that Her Majesty's Secretary for Foreign Affairs will consent to appoint you consul at Cattaro, full details of which post, duties, salary, &c., will be communicated to you in the official despatch from the Foreign Office.

"Sir Francis Deighton is most happy to have been the means through which the son of an old friend has been introduced into the service of the Crown.

"I have the honour to be, sir,

"Your obedient Servant,

"Grey Egerton D'Eyncourt,

"*Private Secretary.*"

"What will he say now, Gusty?" said she, triumphantly.

"He will probably say, 'What's it worth?' Nelly. 'How much is the income?'"

"I suppose he will. I take it he will measure a friend's good feeling towards us by the scale of an official salary, as if two or three hundred a year more or less could affect the gratitude we must feel towards a real patron."

A slight twinge of pain seemed to move Bramleigh's mouth; but he grew calm in a moment, and merely said, "We must wait till we hear more."

"But your mind is at ease, Gusty? Tell me that your anxieties are all allayed?" cried she, eagerly.

"Yes; in so far that I have got something—that I have not met a cold refusal."

"Oh, don't take it that way," broke she in, looking at him with a half-reproachful expression. "Do not, I beseech you, let Mr. Cutbill's spirit influence you. Be hopeful and trustful, as you always were."

"I'll try," said he passing his arm round her, and smiling affectionately at her.

"I hope he has gone, Gusty. I do hope we shall not see him again. He is so terribly hard in his judgments, so merciless in the way he sentences people who merely think differently from himself. After hearing him talk for an hour or so, I always go away with the thought that if the world be only half as bad as he says it is, it's little worth living in."

"Well, he will go to-morrow, or Thursday at farthest; and I won't pretend I shall regret him. He is occasionally too candid."

"His candour is simply rudeness; frankness is very well for a friend, but he was never in the position to use this freedom. Only think of what he said to me yesterday: he said that as it was not unlikely I should have to turn governess or companion, the first thing I should do would be to change my name. 'They,' he remarked—but I don't well know whom he exactly meant—'they don't like broken-down gentlefolk. They suspect them of this, that, and the other;' and he suggested I should call myself Miss Cutbill. Did you ever hear impertinence equal to that?"

"But it may have been kindly intentioned, Nelly. I have no doubt he meant to do a good-natured thing."

"Save me from good-nature that is not allied with good manners, then," said she, growing crimson as she spoke.

"I have not escaped scot-free, I assure you," said he, smiling; "but it seems to me a man really never knows what the world thinks of him till he has gone through the ordeal of broken fortune. By the way, where is Cattaro? the name sounds Italian."

"I assumed it to be in Italy somewhere, but I can't tell you why."

Bramleigh took down his atlas, and pored patiently over Italy and her outlying islands for a long time, but in vain. Nelly, too, aided him in his search, but to no purpose. While

they were still bending over the map, Cutbill entered with a large despatch-shaped letter in his hand.

"The Queen's messenger has just handed me that for you, Bramleigh. I hope it's good news."

Bramleigh opened and read:—

"Foreign Office.

"SIR,

"I have had much pleasure in submitting your name to Her Majesty for the appointment of consul at Cattaro, where your salary will be two hundred pounds a year, and twenty pounds for office expenses. You will repair to your post without unnecessary delay, and report your arrival to this department."

"I am, &c., &c.,

"BIDDLESWORTH."

"Two hundred a year! Fifty less than we gave our cook!" said Bramleigh, with a faint smile.

"It is an insult, an outrage," said Nelly, whose face and neck glowed till they appeared crimson. "I hope, Gusty, you'll have the firmness to reject such an offer."

"What does Mr. Cutbill say?" asked he, turning towards him.

"Mr. Cutbill says that if you're bent on playing Don Quixote, and won't go back and enjoy what's your own, like a sensible man, this pittance—it ain't more—is better than trying to eke out life by your little talents."

Nelly turned her large eyes, open to the widest, upon him, as he spoke, with an expression so palpably that of rebuke for his freedom, that he replied to her stare by saying,—

"Of course I am very free and easy. More than that, I'm downright rude. That's what you mean—a vulgar dog! but don't you see that's what diminished fortune must bring you to? You'll have to live with vulgar dogs. It's not only coarse cookery, but coarse company a man comes to. Ay, and there are people will tell you that both are useful—as alteratives, as the doctors call them."

It was a happy accident that made him lengthen out the third syllable of the word, which amused Nelly so much that she laughed outright.

"Can you tell us where is Cattaro, Mr. Cutbill?" asked Bramleigh, eager that the other should not notice his sister's laughter.

"I haven't the faintest notion; but Bollard, the messenger, is eating his luncheon at the station: I'll run down and ask him." And without waiting for a reply, he seized his hat and hurried away.

"One must own he is good-natured," said Nelly, "but he does makes us pay somewhat smartly for it. His wholesome truths are occasionally hard to swallow."

"As he told us, Nelly, we must accept these things as part of our changed condition. Poverty wouldn't be such a hard thing to bear if it only meant common food and coarse clothing; but it implies scores of things that are far less endurable."

While they thus talked, Cutbill had hurried down to the station, and just caught the messenger as he was taking his seat in the train. Two others—one bound for Russia and one for Greece—were already seated in the compartment, smoking their cigars with an air of quiet indolence, like men making a trip by a river steamer.

"I say, Bollard," cried Cutbill, "where is Cattaro?"

"Don't know; is he a tenor?"

"It's a place; a consulate somewhere or other."

"Never heard of it. Have you, Digby?"

"It sounds like Calabria, or farther south."

"I know it," said the third man. "It's a vile hole; it's on the eastern shore of the Adriatic. I was wrecked there once in an Austrian Lloyd's steamer, and caught a tertian fever before I could get away. There was a fellow there, a vice-consul they called him: he was dressed in sheepskins, and, I believe, lived by wrecking. He stole my watch, and would have carried away my portmanteau, but I was waiting for him with my revolver, and winged him."

"Did nothing come of it?" asked another.

"They pensioned him, I think. I'm not sure; but I think they gave him twenty pounds a year. I know old Kepsley stopped eight pounds out of my salary for a wooden leg for the rascal. There's the whistle; take care, sir, you'll come to grief if you hang on."

Cutbill attended to the admonition, and bidding the travellers good bye, returned slowly to the Bramleighs' lodgings, pondering over all he had heard, and canvassing with himself how much of his unpleasant tidings he would venture to relate.

"Where's your map?" said he, entering. "I suspect I can make out the place now. Show me the Adriatic. Zara

—Lissa—what a number of islands. Here you are, here's Bocca di Cattaro—next door to the Turks, by Jove."

"My dear Gusty, don't think of this, I beseech you," said Nelly, whispering. "It is enough to see where it is, to know it must be utter barbarism."

"I won't say it looks inviting," said Cutbill, as he bent over the map, "and the messenger hadn't much to say in its praise either."

"Probably not; but remember what you told me a while ago, Mr. Cutbill, that even this was better than depending on my little talents."

"He holds little talents in light esteem then?" said Ellen, tartly.

"That's exactly what I do," rejoined Cutbill, quickly. "As long as you are rich enough to be courted for your wealth, your little talents will find plenty of admirers; but as to earning your bread by them, you might as well try to go round the Cape in an outrigger. Take it by all means—take it, if it is only to teach you what it is to earn your own dinner."

"And is my sister to face such a life as this?"

"Your sister has courage for everything—but leaving you," said she, throwing her arm on his shoulder.

"I must be off. I have only half an hour left to pack my portmanteau and be at the station. One word with you alone, Bramleigh," said he in a low tone, and Augustus walked at once into the adjoining room.

"You want some of these, I'm certain," said Cutbill, as he drew forth a roll of crushed and crumpled bank-notes, and pressed them into Bramleigh's hand. "You'll pay them back at your own time; don't look so stiff, man; it's only a loan."

"I assure you if I look stiff, it's not what I feel. I'm overwhelmed by your good-nature; but, believe me, I'm in no want of money."

"Nobody ever is; but it's useful all the same. Take them to oblige me; take them just to show you're not such a swell as won't accept even the smallest service from a fellow like me—do now, do!" and he looked so pleadingly that it was not easy to refuse him.

"I'm very proud to think I have won such friendship; but I give you my word I have ample means for all that I shall need to do; and if I should not, I'll ask you to help me."

"Good bye, then. Good bye, Miss Ellen," cried he aloud. "It's not *my* fault that I'm not a favourite with you;" and

thus saying, he snatched his hat, and was down the stairs and out of the house before Bramleigh could utter a word.

"What a kind-hearted fellow it is," said he, as he joined his sister. "I must tell you what he called me aside for."

She listened quietly while he recounted what had just occurred, and then said,—

"The Gospel tells us it's hard for rich men to get to heaven; but it's scarcely less hard for them to see what there is good here below! So long as we were well off I could see nothing to like in that man."

"That was my own thought a few minutes back; so you see, Nelly, we are not only travelling the same road, but gaining the same experiences."

"Sedley says in this letter here," said Augustus the next morning as he entered the breakfast-room, "that Pracontal's lawyer is perfectly satisfied with the honesty of our intentions, and we shall go to trial in the November term on the ejectment case. It will raise the whole question, and the law shall decide between us."

"And what becomes of that—that arrangement," said she, hesitatingly, "by which M. Pracontal consented to withdraw his claim?"

"It was made against my consent, and I have refused to adhere to it. I have told Sedley so, and told him that I shall hold him responsible to the amount disbursed."

"But, dear Gusty, remember how much to your advantage that settlement would have been."

"I only remember the shame I felt on hearing of it, and my sorrow that Sedley should have thought my acceptance of it possible."

"But how has M. Pracontal taken this money and gone on with his suit?—surely both courses are not open to him?"

"I can tell you nothing about M. Pracontal. I only know that he, as well as myself, would seem to be strangely served by our respective lawyers, who assume to deal for us, whether we will or not."

"I still cling to the wish that the matter had been left to Mr. Sedley."

"You must not say so, Nelly; you must never tell me you would wish I had been a party to my own dishonour. Either Pracontal or I own this estate: no compromise could be possible without a stain to each of us, and for my own part I will neither resist a just claim nor give way to an unfair demand. Let us talk of this no more."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WITH LORD CULDUFF.

In a room of a Roman palace large enough to be a church, but furnished with all the luxury of an English drawing-room, stood Lord Culduff, with his back to an ample fire, smoking a cigarette; a small table beside him supported a very diminutive coffee-service of chased silver, and in a deep-cushioned chair at the opposite side of the fireplace lay a toy terrier, asleep.

There were two fireplaces in the spacious chamber, and at a writing-table drawn close to the second of these sat Temple Bramleigh writing. His pen as it ran rapidly along was the only sound in the perfect stillness, till Lord Culduff, throwing the end of his cigarette away, said, "It is not easy to imagine so great an idiot as your worthy brother Augustus."

"A little selfishness would certainly not disimprove him," said Temple, coldly.

"Say sense, common sense, sir; a very little of that humble ingredient that keeps a man from walking into a well."

"I think you judge him hardly."

"Judge him hardly! Why, sir, what judgment can equal the man's own condemnation of himself? He has some doubts—some very grave doubts—about his right to his estate, and straightway he goes and throws it into a law-court. He prefers, in fact, that his inheritance should be eaten up by lawyers than quietly enjoyed by his own family. Such men are usually provided with lodgings at Hanwell; their friends hide their razors, and don't trust them with toothpicks."

"Oh, this is too much: he may take an extreme view of what his duty is in this matter, but he's certainly no more mad than I am."

"I repeat, sir, that the man who takes conscience for his guide in the very complicated concerns of life is unfit to manage his affairs. Conscience is a constitutional peculiarity, nothing more. To attempt to subject the business of life to conscience would be about as absurd as to regulate the funds by the state of the barometer."

"I'll not defend what he is doing—I'm as sorry for it as any one; I only protest against his being thought a fool."

"What do you say then to this last step of his, if it be indeed true that he has accepted this post?"

"I'm afraid it is; my sister Ellen says they are on their way to Cattaro."

"I declare that I regard it as an outrage. I can give it no other name. It is an outrage. What, sir, am I, who have reached the highest rank of my career, or something very close to it; who have obtained my Grand Cross; who stand, as I feel I do, second to none in the public service;—am I to have my brother-in-law, my wife's brother, gazetted to a post I might have flung to my valet!"

"There I admit he was wrong."

"That is to say, sir, that you feel the personal injury his indiscreet conduct has inflicted. You see your own ruin in his rashness."

"I can't suppose it will go that far."

"And why not, pray? When a Minister or Secretary of State dares to offend me—for it is levelled at *me*—by appointing my brother to such an office, he says as plainly as words can speak, 'Your sun is set; your influence is gone. We place you below the salt to-day, that to-morrow we may put you outside the door.' *You* cannot be supposed to know these things, but *I* know them. Shall I give you a counsel, sir?"

"Any advice from you, my lord, is always acceptable."

"Give up the line. Retire; be a gamekeeper, a billiard-marker; turn steward of a steamer, or correspond for one of the penny papers, but don't attempt to serve a country that pays its gentlemen like toll-keepers."

Temple seemed to regard this little outburst as such an ordinary event that he dipped his pen into the ink-bottle, and was about to resume writing, when Lord Culduff said, in a sharp, peevish tone,—

"I trust your brother and sister do not mean to come to Rome?"

"I believe they do, my lord. I think they have promised to pay the L'Estranges a visit at Albano."

"My lady must write at once and prevent it. This cannot possibly be permitted. Where are they now?"

"At Como. This last letter was dated from the inn at that place."

Lord Culduff rang the bell, and directed the servant to ask if her ladyship had gone out.

The servant returned to say that her ladyship was going to dress but would see his lordship on her way downstairs.

"Whose card is this? Where did this come from?" asked Lord Culduff, as he petulantly turned it round and round, trying to read the name.

"Oh, that's Mr. Cutbill. He called twice yesterday. I can't imagine what has brought him to Rome."

"Perhaps I might hazard a guess," said Lord Culduff, with a grim smile. "But I'll not see him. You'll say, Bramleigh, that I am very much engaged; that I have a press of most important business; that the Cardinal Secretary is always here. Say anything, in short, that will mean No, Cutbill!"

"He's below at this moment."

"Then get rid of him! My dear fellow, the A B C of your craft is to dismiss the importunate. Go, and send him off!"

Lord Culduff turned to caress his whiskers as the other left the room; and having gracefully disposed a very youthful curl of his wig upon his forehead, was smiling a pleasant recognition of himself in the glass, when voices in a louder tone than were wont to be heard in such sacred precincts startled him. He listened, and suddenly the door was opened rudely, and Mr. Cutbill entered, Temple Bramleigh falling back as the other came forward, and closing the door behind.

"So, my lord, I was to be told you'd not see me, eh?" said Cutbill, his face slightly flushed by a late altercation.

"I trusted, sir, when my private secretary had told you I was engaged, that I might have counted upon not being broken in upon."

"There you were wrong, then," said Cutbill, who divested himself of an overcoat, threw it on the back of a chair, and came forward towards the fire. "Quite wrong. A man doesn't come a thousand and odd miles to be 'not-at-homed' at the end of it."

"Which means, sir, that I am positively reduced to the necessity of receiving you, whether I will or not?"

"Something near that, but not exactly. You see, my lord, that when to my application to your lawyer in town I received for answer the invariable rejoinder, 'It is only my lord himself can reply to this; his lordship alone knows what this, that, or t'other refers to,' I knew pretty well the intention was to choke me off. It was saying to me, Is it worth a journey to Rome to ask this question? and my

reply to myself was, 'Yes, Tom Cutbill, go to Rome by all means.' And here I am."

"So I perceive, sir," said the other dryly and gravely.

"Now, my lord, there are two ways of transacting business. One may do the thing pleasantly, with a disposition to make matters easy and comfortable; or one may approach everything with a determination to screw one's last farthing out of it; to squeeze the lemon to the last drop. Which of these is it your pleasure we should choose?"

"I must endeavour to imitate, though I cannot rival your frankness, sir; and therefore I would say, let us have that mode in which we shall see least of each other."

"All right. I am completely in your lordship's hands. You had your choice, and I don't dispute it. There, then, is my account. It's a trifle under fourteen hundred pounds. Your lordship's generosity will make it the fourteen, I've no doubt. All the secret-service part—that trip to town and the dinner at Greenwich—I've left blank. Fill it up as your conscience suggests. The Irish expenses are also low, as I lived a good deal at Bishop's Folly. I also make no charge for keeping you out of *Punch*. It wasn't easy, all the same, for the fellows had you, wig, waistcoat and all. In fact, my lord, it's a friendly document, though your present disposition doesn't exactly seem to respond to that line of action; but Tom Cutbill is a forgiving soul. Your lordship will look over this paper, then; and in a couple of days—no hurry, you know, for I have lots to see here—in a couple of days I'll drop in, and talk the thing over with you; for you see there are two or three points—about the way you behaved to your brother-in-law, and such like—that I'd like to chat a little with you about."

As Lord Culduff listened his face grew redder and redder, and his fingers played with the back of the chair on which he leaned with a quick, convulsive motion; and as the other went on he drew from time to time long, deep inspirations, as if invoking patience to carry him through the infliction. At last he said, in a half-faint voice, "Have you done, sir—is it over?"

"Well, pretty nigh. I'd like to have asked you about my lady. I know she had a temper of her own before you married her, and I'm rather curious to hear how you hit it off together. Does she give in—eh? Has the high and mighty dodge subdued her? I thought it would."

"Do me the great favour, sir, to ring that bell and to

leave me. I am not very well," said Culduff, gasping for breath.

"I see that. I see you've got the blood to your head. When a man comes to your time of life, he must mind what he eats, and stick to pint bottles too. That's true as the Bible—pint bottles and plenty of Seltzer when you're amongst the seventies."

And with this aphorism he drew on his coat, buttoned it leisurely to the collar, and with a familiar nod left the room.

"Giacomo," said Lord Culduff, "that man is not to be admitted again on any pretext. Tell the porter his place shall pay for it, if he passes the grille."

Giacomo bowed silent acquiescence, and Lord Culduff lay back on a sofa and said, "Tell Dr. Pritchard to come here, tell my lady, tell Mr. Temple, I feel very ill," and so saying he closed his eyes and seemed overcome.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT ALBANO.

"WHO do you think asks himself to dine with us to-day, Julia?" said L'Estrange to his sister on the day of the scene recorded in our last chapter.

"I cannot guess; but I am prepared to say I'll be glad to see any one."

"It is very dull for you, indeed," said he, compassionately.

"No, George, not that. Not half so bad for *me* as for *you;* but somehow I felt it would be a relief to have a guest, who would oblige us to drop our grumblings and exert ourselves to talk of something besides our own personal worries. Now, who is it?"

"What would you say to Mr. Cutbill?"

"Do you mean the engineering man we saw at Castello?"

"The same."

"Oh, dear! I retract. I recall my last speech, and avow, in all humility, I was wrong. All I remember of that man —not much certainly—but all I do remember of him was that he was odious."

"He was amusing, in his way."

"Probably—but I detested 'his way.'"

"The Bramleighs said he was good-natured."

"With all my heart. Give him all the excellent qualities you like; but he will still remain insufferably ill-bred and coarse-minded. Why did you ask him, George?"

"I didn't; he asked himself. Here's his note: 'Dear L'Estrange'—familiar enough—'Dear L'Estrange—I have just arrived here, and want to have some talk with you. I mean, therefore, to ask you to let me take a bit of dinner with you to-day. I shall be out by five or half-past. Don't make a stranger of me, but give me the cold mutton or whatever it is.—Yours, TOM CUTBILL.'"

"What a type of the writer!"

"Well; but what can we get for dinner, Ju?"

"The cold mutton, I think. I'm sure the gentleman's estimate of his value as a guest cannot be too low."

"No, Julia, let us treat him to our best. He means kindly by coming out here to see us."

"I'd have taken the will for the deed with more of gratitude. Oh, George," cried she with fervour, "why will you be always so much obliged to the man who condescends to eat your salt? This Mr. Cutbill will be your patron for the next twenty-four hours."

"Certainly the man who dines with us cannot come for the excellence of our fare."

"That is a very ingenious bit of self-flattery; but don't trust it, George. Men eat bad dinners continually; and there is a sort of condescension in eating them at a friend's house, which is often mistaken for good-nature; and the fun of it is that the men who do these things are very vain of the act."

L'Estrange gave a little shrug of his shoulders. It was his usual reply to those subtleties which his sister was so fond of, and that he was never very sure whether they were meant to puzzle or to persuade him.

"So then he is to be an honoured guest, George, eh?"

He smiled a gentle assent, and she went on: "And we are to treat him to that wonderful Rhine wine Sir Marcus sent you to cure your ague. And the very thought of drinking anything so costly actually brought on a shivering attack."

"Have we any of it left?"

"Two bottles, if those uncouth little flattened flasks can be called bottles. And since you are resolved he is to be entertained like a 'Prince Russe,' I'll actually treat him to a dish of maccaroni of my own invention. You remember, George, Mrs. Monkton was going to withdraw her subscription from the Church when she ate of it, and remained a firm Protestant."

"Julia, Julia!" said he, in a half-reproving tone.

"I am simply citing an historical fact, but you'll provoke me to say much worse if you stand there with that censorial face. As if I didn't know how wrong it was to speak lightly of a lady who subscribes two hundred francs a year."

"There are very few who do so," said he, with a sigh.

"My poor brother," said she, caressingly, "it is a very hard case to be so poor, and we with such refined tastes and such really nice instincts; we, who would like a pretty house, and a pretty garden, and a pretty little equipage, and who would give pretty little dinners, with the very neatest cut glass and china, and be, all the time, so cultivated and so simple, so

elevated in tone and so humble in spirit. There, go away, and look after some fruit—do something, and don't stand there provoking me to talk nonsense. That solemn look made me ten times more silly than I ever intended to be."

"I'm sure," said L'Estrange, thoughtfully, "he has something to tell me of the coal-mine."

"Ah, if I thought that, George? If I thought he brought us tidings of a great 'dividend'—isn't that the name for the thing the people always share amongst themselves, out of somebody else's money? So I have shocked you, at last, into running away; and now for the cares of the household."

Now, though she liked to quiz her brother about his love of hospitality and the almost reckless way in which he would spend money to entertain a guest, it was one of her especial delights to play hostess, and receive guests with whatever display their narrow fortune permitted. Nor did she spare any pains she could bestow in preparing to welcome Mr. Cutbill, and her day was busily passed between the kitchen, the garden, and the drawing-room, ordering, aiding, and devising with a zeal and activity that one might have supposed could only have been evoked in the service of a much honoured guest.

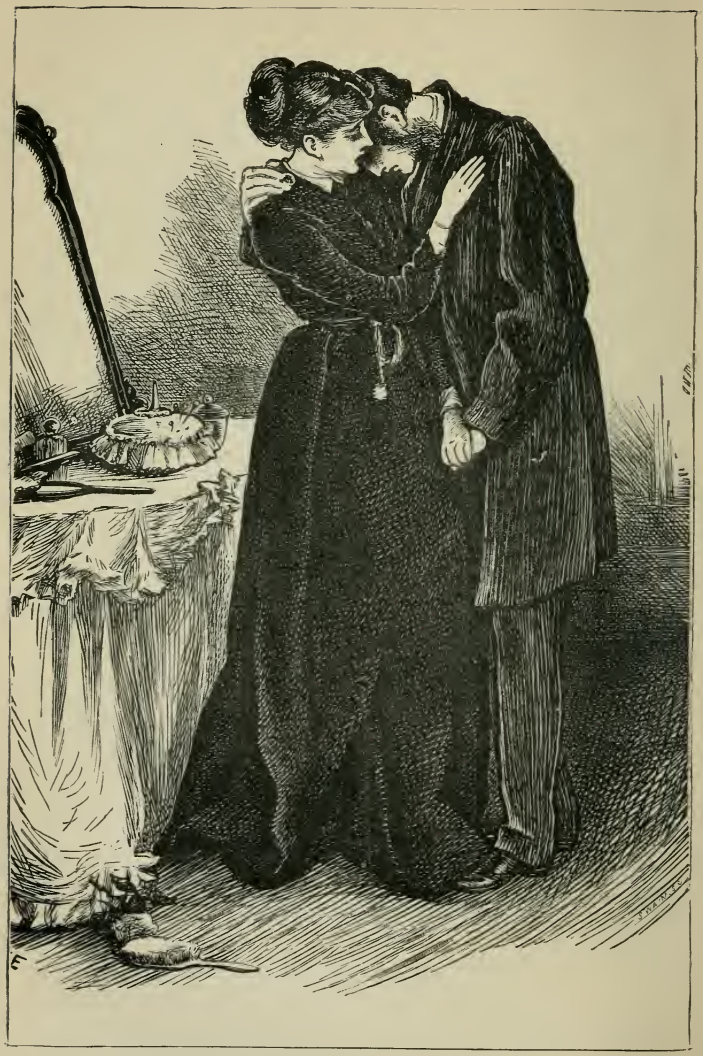
"Look at my table, George," said she, "before you go to dress for dinner, and say if you ever saw anything more tasteful. There's a bouquet for you; and see how gracefully I have twined the grape-leaves round these flasks. You'll fancy yourself Horace entertaining Mæcenas. Mr. Cutbill is certainly not very like him—but no matter. Nor is our little Monte Oliveto exactly Falernian."

"It is quite beautiful, Ju, all of it," said he, drawing her towards him and kissing her; but there was a touch of sadness in his voice, as in his look, to which she replied with a merry laugh, and said,—

"Say it out boldly, George, do; say frankly what a sin and a shame it is, that such a dear good girl should have to strain her wits in this hand-to-hand fight with Poverty, and not be embellishing some splendid station with her charming talents, and such like."

"I was thinking something not very far from it," said he, smiling.

"Of course you were; but you never thought, perhaps, how soon ennui and lassitude might have taken the place of all my present energy. I want to please you now, George,



"'George, George, do no not give way thus.'"

since without me you would be desolate; but if we were rich, you'd not depend on me, and I'd have been very dispirited and very sad. There now, that's quite enough of sentimentalizing for once. I'm off to dress. Do you know," said she, as she mounted the stairs, "I have serious thoughts of captivating Mr. Cutbill?"

"Oh, Julia, I entreat——" but she was gone ere he could finish, and her merry laughter was heard till her door closed.

Poor girl, her light-heartedness died out as she felt herself alone, and turning towards a little photograph of a man in a naval uniform, that hung over the chimney, her eyes grew dim with tears as she gazed on it.

"Ay," said she, bitterly, "and this same humour it was that lost me the truest heart that ever beat! What would I not give now to know that he still remembered me—remembered me with kindness!"

She sat down, with her face buried in her hands, nor stirred till the sound of voices beneath apprised her that their guest had arrived.

While she was yet standing before her glass, and trying to efface the traces of sorrow on her features, George tapped softly at her door. "May I come in?" cried he. "Oh, Julia," said he, as he drew nigh, "it is worse than I had even suspected. Cutbill tells me that——"

He could not go on, but bending his head on her shoulder, sobbed hysterically.

"George, George, do not give way thus," said she calmly. "What is it has happened? What has he told you?"

"The mine—the Lisconnor scheme—is bankrupt."

"Is that all?"

"All! Why it is ruin—utter ruin! Every shilling that you had in the world is gone, and I have done it all." And once more his feelings overcame him, and he sobbed convulsively.

"But, my dear, dear brother," said she, fondly, "if it's lost it's lost, and there's no help for it; and let us never fret over what binds us only the closer together. You can't get rid of me, now, for I declare, George, no earthly consideration will make me accept Mr. Cutbill."

"Oh, how can you jest this way, Julia, at such a moment!"

"I assure you I am most serious. I know that man intends to propose to me, and you are just in the humour to mix up our present misfortunes and his pretensions, and

actually espouse his cause; but it's no use, George, no use whatever. I'll not consent. Go downstairs, now. Stay, let me wipe those red eyes. Don't let that man see any trace of this sorrow about you; bear up quietly and well. You shall see that I do not give counsel without being able to show example. Go down now, and I'll follow you."

As he left the room she sat down, and accidentally so as to see her face in the glass. The forced smile which she had put on was only slowly vanishing from her features, and she was shocked at the pallor that now succeeded.

"I *am* looking very ill," muttered she. "There's no denying it. That man will certainly see how this news has struck me down, and I would not that he should witness my want of courage. I wish I had—no, I don't. I'd not put on rouge if I had it; but I wish we were alone to-day, and could talk over our fortune together. Perhaps it's as well as it is." And now she arose and descended the stairs hastily, as though not to give herself time for further thought.

Cutbill was in the act of cautioning L'Estrange against speaking of the Lisconnor misfortune to his sister when she entered the room. "Do you forget me, Miss L'Estrange," said he, coming forward, "or am I to remind you that we met in Ireland?"

"Forget you, Mr. Cutbill," replied she, laughingly; "how can I forget the charming tenor who sang second to me, or the gallant cavalier who rode out with me?"

"Ay, but I got a roll in a duck-pond that day," said he, grimly. "You persuaded me to let the beast drink, and he lay down in the water and nearly squashed me."

"Oh, you almost killed me with laughter. I had to hold on by the crutch of my saddle to save myself from falling into the pond."

"And I hear you made a sketch of me."

"Have you not seen it? I declare I thought I had shown it to you; but I will after dinner, if I can find it."

The dinner was announced at this moment, and they proceeded to the dining-room.

"Taste is everything," said Cutbill, as he unfolded his napkin, and surveyed the table, decked out with fruit and flowers with a degree of artistic elegance that appealed even to *him*. "Taste is everything. I declare to you that Howell and James would pay fifty pounds down just for that urn as it stands there. How you twined those lilies around it in that way is quite beyond me."

As the dinner went on he was in ecstasy with everything.

"Don't part with your cook, even after they make a bishop of you," said he. "I don't know the French name of that dish, but I believe it's a stewed hare. Might I send my plate twice?"

"Mr. Cutbill saw the Bramleighs at Como, Julia," said L'Estrange, to take him, if possible, off the subject of the entertainment.

"I did, indeed. I met them at that very hotel that was once Queen Caroline's house. There they were diverting themselves—boating and going about just as if the world had gone all right with them; and Bramleigh told me one morning that he had cashed the last cheque for fifty pounds."

"And is he really determined to touch nothing of his property till the law assures him that his right is undeniable?"

"Worse than that, far worse; he has quarrelled with old Sedley, his father's law-agent for forty years, and threatened him with an action for having entered into a compromise without instructions or permission; and he is wrong, clearly wrong, for I saw the correspondence, and if it goes before a jury, they'll say at once that there was consent."

"Had he then forgotten it?" asked Julia.

"No, he neither forgets nor remembers; but he has a sort of flighty way of getting himself into a white heat of enthusiasm; and though he cools down occasionally into a little common sense, it doesn't last; he rushes back into his heroics, and raves about saving him from himself, rescuing him from the ignoble temptation of self-interest, and such like balderdash."

"There must be a great deal of true nobility in such a nature," said Julia.

"I'll tell you what there is; and it runs through them all except the eldest daughter, and that puppy the diplomatist —there's madness!"

"Madness?"

"Well, I call it madness. Suppose now I was to decline taking another glass of that wine—Steinheimer, I think it's called—till I saw your brother's receipt for the payment of it, wouldn't you say I was either mad or something very near it?"

"I don't see the parity between the two cases," said Julia.

"Ah, you're too sharp for me, Miss Julia, too sharp; but I'm right all the same. Isn't Jack Bramleigh mad? Is it any-

thing but madness for a man to throw up his commission and go and serve as a sailor—before the mast or behind it, I don't care which; but isn't that madness?'

Julia felt a sense of sickness almost to fainting, but she never spoke nor stirred, while George, quickly noticing her state, turned towards Cutbill and said,—

"What news have you of him? he was a great favourite of mine."

"Of yours and of everybody's," said Cutbill. And now the colour rushed back to Julia's cheek, and had Cutbill but looked towards her, it is very probable he would greatly have misconstrued the smile she gave him. "I wish I had news of him: but for these last few months I have none. When he got out to China he found that great house, Alcock and Baines, smashed—all the tea-merchants were smashed—and they tell me that he shipped with a Yankee for Constantinople."

"You heard from him, then?"

"No; he never writes to any one. He may send you a newspaper, or a piece of one, to show where he is; but he says he never was able to say what was in his head, and he always found he was writing things out of the 'Complete Correspondent.'"

"Poor Jack!"

"Shall I go and look after your coffee, George? You say you like me to make it myself," said Julia; and she arose and left the room almost before he could reply.

"You'll never marry while she's your housekeeper, I see that," said Cutbill, as the door closed after her.

"She is my greatest comfort in life," said the other, warmly.

"I see it all; and the whole time of dinner I was thinking what a pity it was—— No matter, I'll not say what I was going to say. I'm glad you haven't told her of the smash till I see what I can do with the old Viscount."

"But I have told her; she knows it all."

"And do you tell me she had that heavy load on her heart all the time she was talking and laughing there?"

L'Estrange nodded.

"It's only women bear up that way. Take my word for it, if it had been one of us, he'd not have come down to dinner, he'd not have had pluck to show himself. There's where they beat us, sir—that's real courage."

"You are not taking your wine," said L'Estrange, seeing him pass the bottle.

"No; I want my head clear this evening, I want to be cool and collected. I'll not drink any more. Tell me about yourself a little; how do you get on here? do you like the place? do you like the people?"

"The place is charming; we like it better every day we live in it."

"And the people—the English, I mean; what of them?"

"They mean kindly enough, indeed they are often very kind; but they do not live in much harmony, and they only agree in one thing——"

"I know what that is. They all join to worry the parson—of course they do. Did you ever live in a lodging-house, L'Estrange? If you did, you must have seen how the whole population coalesced to torment the maid-of-all-work. She belonged to them all, collectively and individually. And so it is with you. You are the maid-of-all-work. You have to make Brown's bed, and black Robinson's boots—spiritually, I mean—and none recognizes the claim of his neighbour, each believes you belong to himself. That's the voluntary system, as they call it; and a quicker way to drive a man mad was never invented."

"Perhaps you take an extreme view of it——" began L'Estrange.

"No, I don't," interrupted the other. "I've only to look at your face, and instead of the fresh cheeks and the clear bright eyes I remember when I saw you first, I see you now anxious and pale and nervous. Where's the pluck that enabled you to ride at a five-foot wall? Do you think you could do it now?"

"Very likely not. Very likely it is all the better I should not."

"You'll not get me to believe that. No man's nature was ever bettered for being bullied."

L'Estrange laughed heartily, not in the least degree angered by the other's somewhat coarse candour.

"It's a queer world altogether; but maybe if each of us was doing the exact thing he was fit for, life wouldn't be half as good a thing as it is. The whole thing would be like a piece of machinery, and instead of the hitches and make-shifts that we see now, and that bring out men's qualities and test their natures, we'd have nothing but a big workshop, where each did his own share of the work, and neither asked aid nor gave it. Do you permit a cigar?"

"Of course; but I've nothing worth offering you."

"I have though," said he, producing his case and drawing forth a cheroot, and examining it with that keen scrutiny and that seeming foretaste of enjoyment peculiar to smokers. "Try that, and tell me when you tasted the equal of it. Ah, L'Estrange, we must see and get you out of this. It's not a place for you. A nice little vicarage in Hants or Herts, a sunny glebe, with a comfortable house and a wife; later on, a wife of course, for your sister won't stay with you always."

"You've drawn a pleasant picture—only to rub it out again."

"Miss Julia has got a bad headache, sir," said the maid, entering at this moment, "and begs you will excuse her. Will you please to have coffee here or in the drawing-room?"

"Ay, here," said Cutbill, answering the look with which the other seemed to interrogate him. "She couldn't stand it any longer, and no wonder; but I'll not keep you away from her now. Go up and say, I'll see Lord Culduff in the morning, and if I have any news worth reporting, I'll come out here in the afternoon."

CHAPTER XL.

"A RECEPTION" AT ROME.

It was the night of the Countess Balderoni's weekly reception, and the servants had just lighted up the handsome suite of rooms and disposed the furniture in fitting order, when the Countess and Lady Augusta Bramleigh entered to take a passing look at the apartment before the arrival of the guests.

"It is so nice," said Lady Augusta, in her peculiar languid way, "to live in a country where the people are civilized enough to meet for intercourse without being fed, or danced, or fiddled for. Now, I tried this in London; but it was a complete failure. If you tell English people you are 'at home' every Tuesday or every Thursday evening, they will make a party some particular night and storm your salons in hundreds, and you'll be left with three or four visitors for the remainder of the season. Isn't that so?"

"I suspect it is. But you see how they fall into our ways here; and if they do not adopt them at home, there may be something in the climate or the hours which forbids it."

"No, *cara;* it is simply their dogged material spirit, which says, 'We go out for a *dejeûné*, or a dinner, or a ball.' There must be a substantial programme of a something to be eaten or to be done. I declare I believe I detest our people."

"How are you, then, to live amongst them?"

"I don't mean it. I shall not go back. If I grow weary of Europe, I'll try Egypt, or I'll go live at Lebanon. Do you know, since I saw Lear's picture of the cedars, I have been dying to live there. It would be so delightful to lie under the great shade of those glorious trees, with one's 'barb' standing saddled near, and groups of Arabs in their white burnouses scattered about. What's this? Here's a note for you?"

The Countess took the note from the servant, and ran her eyes hurriedly over it."

"This is impossible," murmured she, "quite impossible. Only think, Gusta, here is the French Secretary of Legation,

Baron de Limayrac, asking my permission to present to me no less a person than Monsieur de Pracontal."

"Do you mean the Pracontal—the Pretender himself?"

"Of course. It can be no other. Can you imagine anything so outrageously in bad taste. Limayrac must know who this man is, what claims he is putting forward, who he assumes to be; and yet he proposes to present him here. Of course I shall refuse him."

"No, *cara*, nothing of the kind. Receive him by all means. You or I have nothing to do with law or lawyers—he does not come here to prosecute his suit. On the contrary, I accept his wish to make our acquaintance as an evidence of a true gentlemanlike instinct; and, besides, I am most eager to see him."

"Remember, Gusta, the Culduffs are coming here, and they will regard this as a studied insult. I think I should feel it such myself in their place."

"I don't think they could. I am certain they ought not. Does any one believe that every person in a room with four or five hundred is his dear friend, devoted to him, and dying to serve him? If you do not actually throw these people together, how are they more in contact in your salon than in the Piazza del Popolo?"

"This note is in pencil, too," went she on. "I suppose it was written here. Where is the Baron de Limayrac?"

"In his carriage, my lady, at the door."

"You see, dearest, you cannot help admitting him."

The Countess had but time to say a few hurried words to the servant, when the doors were thrown open, and the company began to pour in. Arrivals followed each other in rapid succession, and names of every country in Europe were announced, as their titled owners — soldiers, statesmen, cardinals, or ministers—passed on, and *grandes dames* in all the plenitude of splendid toilette, sailed proudly by, glittering with jewels and filmy in costly lace.

While the Countess Balderoni was exchanging salutations with a distinguished guest, the Baron de Limayrac stood respectfully waiting his time to be recognized.

"My friend, Count Pracontal, madame," said he, presenting the stranger, and, though a most frigid bow from the hostess acknowledged the presentation, Pracontal's easy assurance remained unabashed, and, with the coolest imaginable air, he begged he might have the great honour of being presented to Lady Augusta Bramleigh.

Lady Augusta, not waiting for her sister's intervention, at once accepted the speech as addressed to herself, and spoke to him with much courtesy.

"You are new to Rome, I believe?" said she.

"Years ago I was here; but not in the society. I knew only the artists, and that Bohemian class who live with artists," said he, quite easily. "Perhaps I might have the same difficulty still, but Baron de Limayrac and I served together in Africa, and he has been kind enough to present me to some of his friends."

The unaffected tone and the air of good-breeding with which these few words were uttered, went far to conciliate Lady Augusta in his favour; and after some further talk together she left him, promising, at some later period of the evening, to rejoin him and tell him something of the people who were there.

"Do you know, *cara*, that he is downright charming?" whispered she to her sister, as they walked together through the rooms. "Of course I mean Pracontal, he is very witty, and not in the least ill-natured. I'm so sorry the Culduffs have not come. I'd have given anything to present Pracontal to his cousin—if she be his cousin. Oh, here they are: and isn't she splendid in pearls?"

Lord and Lady Culduff moved up the salon as might a prince and princess royal, acknowledging blandly, but condescendingly, the salutations that met them. Knowing and known to every one, they distributed the little graceful greetings with that graduated benignity great people, or would-be great people—for they are more alike than is generally believed—so well understand.

Although Lady Augusta and Lady Culduff had exchanged cards, they had not yet met at Rome, and now, as the proud peer moved along triumphant in the homage rendered to his own claims and to his wife's beauty, Lady Augusta stepped quietly forward, and in a tone familiarly easy said, "Oh, we've met at last, Marion. Pray make me known to Lord Culduff." In the little act of recognition which now passed between these two people, an acute observer might have detected something almost bordering on freemasonry. They were of the same "order," and, though the circumstances under which they met left much to explain, there was that between them which plainly said, "*We* at least play on 'the square' with each other. *We* are within the pale, and scores of little misunderstandings that might serve to

separate or estrange meaner folk, with *us* can wait for their explanations." They chatted away pleasantly for some minutes over the Lord Georges and Lady Georginas of their acquaintance, and reminded each other of little traits of this one's health or that one's temper, as though of these was that world they belonged to made up and fashioned. And all this while Marion stood by mute and pale with anger, for she knew well how Lady Augusta was intentionally dwelling on a theme she could have no part in. It was with a marked change of manner, so marked as to imply a sudden rush of consciousness, that Lady Augusta, turning to her, said,—

"And how do you like Rome?"

A faint motion of the eyelids, and a half-gesture with the shoulders, seeming to express something like indifference, was the reply.

"I believe all English begin in that way. It is a place to grow into—its ways, its hours, its topics are all its own."

"I call it charming," said Lord Culduff, who felt appealed to.

"If you stand long on the brink here," resumed she, "like a timid bather, you'll not have courage to plunge in. You must go at it at once, for there are scores of things will scare you, if you only let them."

Marion stood impassive and fixed, as though she heard but did not heed what was said, while Lord Culduff smiled his approval and nodded his assent in most urbane fashion.

"What if you came and dined here to-morrow, Marion? My sister is wonderfully 'well up' in the place. I warn you as to her execrable dinner; for her cook is Italian, *pur sang*, and will poison you with his national dishes: but we'll be *en petit comité*."

"I think we have something for to-morrow," said Marion, coldly, and looking to Lord Culduff.

"To-morrow—Thursday, Thursday?" said he, hesitating. "I can't remember any engagement for Thursday."

"There is something, I'm sure," said Marion, in the same cold tone.

"Then let it be for Friday, and you'll meet my brother-in-law; it's the only day he ever dines at home in the week."

Lord Culduff bowed an assent, and Marion muttered something that possibly meant acquiescence.

"I've made a little dinner for you for Friday," said Lady Augusta to her sister. "The Culduffs and Monsignors

Ratti—that, with Tonino and ourselves, will be six; and I'll think of another: we can't be an even number. Marion is heart-broken about coming; indeed, I'm not sure we shall see her, after all."

"Are we so very terrible then?" asked the Countess.

"Not *you*, dearest; it is *I* am the dreadful one. I took that old fop a canter into the peerage, and he was so delighted to escape from Bramleighia, that he looked softly into my eyes, and held my hand so unnecessarily long, that she became actually sick with anger. Now I'm resolved that the old lord shall be one of my adorers."

"Oh, Gusta!"

"Yes. I say it calmly and advisedly; that young woman must be taught better manners than to pat the ground impatiently with her foot and to toss her head away when one is talking to her husband. Oh, there's that poor Count Pracontal waiting for me, and looking so piteously at me; I forgot I promised to take him a tour through the rooms, and tell him who everybody is."

The company began to thin off soon after midnight, and by one o'clock the Countess and her sister found themselves standing by a fireplace in a deserted salon, while the servants passed to and fro extinguishing the lights.

"Who was that you took leave of with such emphatic courtesy a few minutes ago?" asked Lady Augusta, as she leaned on the chimney-piece.

"Don't you know; don't you remember him?"

"Not in the least."

"It was Mr. Temple Bramleigh."

"What, *mon fils* Temple! Why didn't he come and speak to me?"

"He said he had been in search of you all the evening, and even asked me to find you out."

"These Sevigné curls do that; no one knows me. Monsignore said he thought I was a younger sister just come out, and was going to warn me of the dangerous rivalry. And that was Temple? His little bit of moustache improves him. I suppose they call him good-looking?"

"Very handsome—actually handsome."

"Oh, dear!" sighed the other, wearily; "one likes these gatherings, but it's always pleasant when they're over; don't you find that?" And not meeting a reply, she went on: "That tiresome man, Sir Marcus Cluff, made a descent upon me, to talk of—what do you think?—the church at Albano.

It seems our parson there has nothing to live on during the winter months, and he is expected to be alive and cheery when spring comes round; and Sir Marcus says, that though seals do this, it's not so easy for a curate; and so I said, 'Why doesn't he join the other army? There's a cardinal yonder will take him into his regiment;' and Sir Marcus couldn't stand this, and left me." She paused, and seemed lost in a deep reverie, and then half murmured rather than said, "What a nice touch he has on the piano; so light and so liquid withal."

"Sir Marcus, do you mean?"

"Of course I don't," she she, pettishly. "I'm talking of Pracontal. I'm sure he sings—he says not, or only for himself; and so I told him he must sing for *me*, and he replied, 'Willingly, for I shall then be beside myself with happiness.' Just fancy a Frenchman trying to say a smart thing in English. I wonder what the Culduffs will think of him?"

"Are they likely to have an opportunity for an opinion?"

"Most certainly they are. I have asked him for Friday. He will be the seventh at our little dinner."

"Not possible, Gusta! You couldn't have done this!"

"I have, I give you my word. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"All the reason in the world. You ask your relatives to a little dinner, which implies extreme intimacy and familiarity; and you invite to meet them a man whom, by every sentiment of self-interest, they must abhor."

"*Cara mia*, I can't listen to such a vulgar argument. M. de Pracontal has charming personal qualities. I chatted about an hour with him, and he is delightfully amusing; he'll no more obtrude his claims or his pretensions than Lord Culduff will speak of his fifty years of diplomatic service. There is no more perfect triumph of good-breeding than when it enables us to enjoy each other's society irrespective of scores of little personal accidents, political estrangements, and the like; and to show you that I have not been the inconsiderate creature you think me, I actually did ask Pracontal if he thought that meeting the Culduffs would be awkward or unpleasant for him, and he said he was overjoyed at the thought; that I could not have done him a favour he would prize more highly."

"*He*, of course, is very vain of the distinction. It is an honour he never could have so much as dreamed of."

"I don't know that. I half suspect he is a gentleman who does not take a depreciatory estimate of either himself or his prospects."

"At all events, Gusta, there shall be no ambuscade in the matter, that I'm determined on. The Culduffs shall know whom they are to meet. I'll write a note to them before I sleep."

"How angry you are for a mere nothing. Do you imagine that the people who sit round a dinner-table have sworn vows of eternal friendship before the soup?"

"You are too provoking, too thoughtless," said the other, with much asperity of voice, and taking up her gloves and her fan from the chimney-piece, she moved rapidly away and left the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

SOME "SALON DIPLOMACIES."

Lord Culduff, attired in a very gorgeous dressing-gown and a cap whose gold tassel hung down below his ear, was seated at a writing-table, every detail of whose appliances was an object of art. From a little golden censer at his side a light blue smoke curled, that diffused a delicious perfume through the room, for the noble lord held it that these adventitious aids invariably penetrated through the sterner material of thought, and relieved by their graceful influence the more laboured efforts of the intellect.

He had that morning been preparing a very careful confidential despatch; he meant it to be a state paper. It was a favourite theory of his, that the Pope might be *exploité* —and his own phrase must be employed to express his meaning—that is, that for certain advantages, not very easily defined, nor intelligible at first blush, the Holy Father might be most profitably employed in governing Ireland. The Pope, in fact, in return for certain things which he did not want, and which we could not give him if he did, was to do for us a number of things perfectly impossible, and just as valueless had they been possible. The whole was a grand

dissolving view of millennial Ireland, with all the inhabitants dressed in green broadcloth, singing "God save the Queen;" while the Pope and the Sacred College were to be in ecstasy over some imaginary concessions of the British Government, and as happy over these supposed benefits as an Indian tribe over a present of glass beads from Birmingham.

The noble diplomatist had just turned a very pretty phrase on the peculiar nature of the priest; his one-sided view of life, his natural credulity, nurtured by church observances, his easily-satisfied greed, arising from the limited nature of his ambitions, and, lastly the simplicity of character engendered by the want of those relations of the family which suggest acute study of moral traits, strongly tinctured with worldliness. Rising above the dialectics of the "Office," he had soared into the style of the essayist. It was to be one of those dispatches which F. O. prints in blue-books, and proudly points to, to show that her sons are as distinguished in letters as they are dexterous in the conduct of negotiations. He had just read aloud a very high-sounding sentence, when Mr. Temple Bramleigh entered, and in that nicely subdued voice which private-secretaryship teaches, said "Mr. Cutbill is below, my lord; will you see him?"

"On no account! The porter has been warned not to admit him, on pain of dismissal. See to it that I am not intruded on by this man."

"He has managed to get in somehow—he is in my room this moment."

"Get rid of him, then, as best you can. I can only repeat that here he shall not come."

"I think, on the whole, it might be as well to see him; a few minutes would suffice," said Temple, timidly.

"And, why, sir, may I ask, am I to be outraged by this man's vulgar presence, even for a few minutes? A few minutes of unmitigated rudeness is an eternity of endurance!"

"He threatens a statement in print; he has a letter ready for the *Times*," muttered Temple.

"This is what we have come to in England. In our stupid worship of what we call public opinion, we have raised up the most despotic tribunal that ever decided a human destiny. I declare solemnly, I'd almost as soon be an American. I vow to heaven that, with the threat of Printing-House Square over me, I don't see how much worse I had been if born in Kansas or Ohio!"

"It is a regular statement of the Lisconnor Mine, drawn up for the money article, and if only a tithe of it be true——"

"Why should it be true, sir?" cried the noble lord, in a tone that was almost a scream. "The public does not want truth—what they want is a scandal—a libellous slander on men of rank; men of note like myself. The vulgar world is never so happy as when it assumes to cancel great public services by some contemptible private scandal. Lord Culduff has checkmated the Russian Ambassador. I know that, but Moses has three acceptances of his protested for non-payment. Lord Culduff has outwitted the Tuileries. Why doesn't he pay his bootmaker? That's their chanson, sir—that's the burden of their low vulgar song. As if *I*, and men of *my* stamp, were amenable to every petty rule and miserable criticism that applies to a clerk in Somerset House. They exact from us the services of a giant, and then would reduce us to their own dwarfish standard whenever there is question of a moral estimate."

He walked to and fro as he spoke, his excitement increasing at every word, the veins in his forehead swelling and the angles of his mouth twitching with a spasmodic motion. "There, sir," cried he, with a wave of his hand; "let there be no more mention of this man. I shall want to see a draft of the educational project, as soon as it is completed. That will do," and with this he dismissed him.

No sooner was the door closed on his departure, than Lord Culduff poured some scented water into a small silver ewer, and proceeded to bathe his eyes and temples, and then, sitting down before a little mirror, he smoothed his eyebrows, and patiently disposed the straggling hairs into line. "Who's there? come in," cried he, impatiently, as a tap was heard at the door, and Mr. Cutbill entered, with the bold and assured look of a man determined on an insolence.

"So, my lord, your servants have got orders not to admit me—the door is to be shut against me!" said he, walking boldly forward and staring fiercely at the other's face.

"Quite true, however you came to know it," said Culduff, with a smile of the easiest, pleasantest expression imaginable. "I told Temple Bramleigh this morning to give the orders you speak of. I said it in these words: Mr. Cutbill got in here a couple of days ago, when I was in the middle of a despatch, and we got talking of this that and t'other, and the end was, I never could take up the clue of what I had been writing. A bore interrupts but does not distract

you: a clever man is sure, by his suggestiveness, to lead you away to other realms of thought: and so I said, a strict quarantine against two people—I'll neither see Antonelli nor Cutbill."

It was a bold shot, and few men would have had courage for such effrontery; but Lord Culduff could do these things with an air of such seeming candour and naturalness, nothing less than a police-agent could have questioned its sincerity. Had a man of his own rank in life "tried it on" in this fashion, Cutbill would have detected the impudent fraud at once. It was the superb dignity, the consummate courtesy of this noble Viscount, aided by every appliance of taste and luxury around him, that assured success here.

"Take that chair, Cutbill, and try a cheroot—I know you like a cheroot. And now for a pleasant gossip; for I *will* give myself a holiday this morning."

"I am really afraid I interrupt you," began Cutbill.

"You do; I won't affect to deny it. You squash that despatch yonder, as effectually as if you threw the ink-bottle over it. When once I get to talk with a man like you, I can't go back to the desk again. Don't you know it yourself? Haven't you felt it scores of times? The stupid man is got rid of just as readily as you throw a pebble out of your shoe; it is your clever fellow that pricks you like a nail."

"I'm sorry, my lord, you should feel me so painfully," said Cutbill, laughing, but with an expression that showed how the flattery had touched him.

"You don't know what a scrape I've got into about *you*."

"About *me?*"

"Yes. My lady heard you were here the other morning, and gave me a regular scolding for not having sent to tell her. You know you were old friends in Ireland."

"I scarcely ventured to hope her ladyship would remember me."

"What! Not remember your admirable imitation of the speakers in the House?—your charming songs that you struck off with such facility—the very best impromptus I ever heard. And, mark you, Cutbill, I knew Theodore Hook intimately—I mean, difference of age and such-like considered, for I was a boy at the time—and I say it advisedly, you are better than Hook."

"Oh, my lord, this is great flattery!"

"Hook was uncertain, too. He was what the French call *journalier*. Now, that, you are not."

Cutbill smiled, for, though he did not in the least know the quality ascribed to him, he was sure it was complimentary, and was satisfied.

"Then there was another point of difference between you. Hook was a snob. He had the uneasy consciousness of social inferiority, which continually drove him to undue familarities. Now, I will say, I never met a man so free from this as yourself. I have made a positive study of you, Cutbill, and I protest I think, as regards tact, you are unrivalled."

"I can only say, my lord, that I never knew it."

"After all," said Lord Culduff, rising and standing with his back to the fire, while, dropping his eyelids he seemed to fall into a reflective vein—"After all, this, as regards worldly success, is the master quality. You may have every gift, and every talent, and every grace, and, wanting 'tact,' they are all but valueless."

Cutbill was silent. He was too much afraid to risk his newly acquired reputation by the utterance of even a word.

"How do you like Rome?" asked his lordship, abruptly.

"I can scarcely say; I've seen very little of it. I know nobody; and, on the whole, I find time hang heavily enough on me."

"But you *must* know people, Cutbill; you must go out. The place has its amusing side; it's not like what we have at home. There's another tone, another style; there is less concentration, so to say, but there's more 'finesse.'"

Cutbill nodded, as though he followed and assented to this.

"Where the priest enters, as such a considerable element of society, there is always a keener study of character than elsewhere. In other places you ask, What a man does? here you inquire, Why he does it?"

Cutbill nodded again.

"The women, too, catch up the light delicate touch which the churchmen are such adepts in; and conversation is generally neater than elsewhere. In a fortnight or ten days hence, you'll see this all yourself. How are you for Italian. Do you speak it well?"

"Not a word, my lord."

"Never mind. French will do perfectly. I declare I think we all owe a debt of gratitude to the First Empire for having given us a language common to all Europe. Neither cooking nor good manners could go on without it, and

apropos of cooking, when will you dine? They are good enough to say here that my cook is the best in Rome. When will you let me have your verdict on him?"

Cutbill felt all the awkwardness that is commonly experienced when a man is asked to be his own inviter.

"To-day," continued Lord Culduff, "we dine at the Duc de Rignano's; we have promised Lady Augusta for Friday; but Saturday, I believe Saturday is free. Shall we say Saturday, Cutbill—eight for half-past? Now, don't fail us. We shall have a few people in the evening, so make no other engagement. By-by."

Cutbill muttered out his acceptance, and retired, half delighted with his success, and half distrustful as to whether he had done what he had come to do, or whether, in not approaching the subject, he had not earned a stronger claim to the possession of that "tact" which his lordship had so much admired in him.

"I'm sure he's an old fox; but he's wonderfully agreeable," muttered he, as he descended the stairs. It was only as he turned into the Piazzo di Spagna, and saw L'Estrange standing looking in at a print-shop, that he remembered how he had left the curate to wait for him, while he made his visit.

"I'm afraid, from your look," said L'Estrange, "that you have no very good news for me. Am I right?"

"Well," said the other, in some confusion, "I won't say that I have anything one could call exactly reassuring to tell."

"Did he suffer you to go into the question fully? Did he show a disposition to treat the matter with any consideration?"

Cutbill shook his head. The consciousness that he had done nothing, had not even broached the subject for which his visit was ostensibly made, overwhelmed him with shame; and he had not the courage to avow how he had neglected the trust committed to him.

"Don't mince matters with me, for the sake of sparing me," continued L'Estrange. "I never closed my eyes last night, thinking over it all; and you can't lower me in my own esteem below what I now feel. Out with it, then, and let me hear the worst, if I must hear it."

"You must have a little patience. Things are not always so bad as they look. I'm to have another interview; and though I won't go so far as to bid you hope, I'd be sorry to say despair. I'm to see him again on Saturday."

"Two more days and nights of anxiety and waiting! But I suppose I deserve it all, and worse. It was in a spirit of greed—ay, of gambling—that I made this venture; and if the punishment could fall on myself alone, I deserve it all."

"Come, come, don't take on in that fashion; never say die. When do the Bramleighs arrive?—don't you expect them this week?"

"They promised to eat their Christmas dinner with us; but shall we have one to give them? You know, I suppose, how matters have gone at Albano? The church patrons have quarrelled, and each has withdrawn his name. No: Mrs. Trumpler remains, and she has drawn out a new code of her own—a thirty-nine articles of her own devising, which I must subscribe, or forfeit her support. The great feature of it all is, that the Bible is never to be quoted except to disprove it; so that what a man lacks in scholarship, he may make up in scepticism."

"And do you take to that?"

"Not exactly; and in consequence I have resigned my chaplaincy, and this morning I received a notice to vacate my house by the last day of the year, and go—I don't think it was suggested where to in particular—but here comes my sister—let us talk of something else."

"Oh, George," cried she, "I have got you such a nice warm coat for your visiting in the cold weather. Will you promise me to wear it, though you will look like a bear. How d'ye do, Mr. Cutbill?"

"I'm bobbish, miss, thank you. And you?"

"I don't exactly know if I'm bobbish, but I'm certainly in good spirits, for I have heard from some very dear friends, who are on their way to see, and spend the Christmas with us."

L'Estrange turned a sudden glance on Cutbill. It was a mere glance, but it said more than words, and was so inexpressibly sad besides, that the other muttered a hurried good bye and left them.

CHAPTER XLII.

A LONG TETE-A-TETE.

PRACONTAL and Longworth sat at breakfast at Freytag's Hotel at Rome. They were splendidly lodged, and the table was spread with all the luxury and abundance which are usually displayed where well-paying guests are treated by wise innkeepers. Fruit and flowers decorated the board, arranged as a painter's eye might have suggested, and nothing was wanting that could gratify the sense of sight or tempt the palate.

"After all," said Longworth. "your song-writer blundered when he wrote 'l'amour.' It is 'l'argent' that 'makes the world go round.' Look at that table, and say what sunshine the morning breaks with, when one doesn't fret about the bill."

"You are right, O Philip," said the other. "Let people say what they may, men love those who spend money. See what a popularity follows the Empire in France, and what is its chief claim? Just what you said a moment back. It never frets about the bill. Contrast the splendour of such a Government with the mean mercantile spirit of your British Parliament, higgling over contracts and cutting down clerks' salaries, as though the nation were glorified when its servants wore broken boots and patched pantaloons."

"The world needs spendthrifts as it needs tornadoes. The whirlwind purifies even as it devastates."

"How grand you are at an aphorism, Philip. You have all the pomp of the pulpit when you deliver a mere platitude."

"To a Frenchman, everything is a platitude that is not a paradox."

"Go on, your vein is wonderful this morning."

"A Frenchman is the travestie of human nature; every sentiment of his is the parody of what it ought to be. He is grave over trifles and evokes mirth out of the deepest melancholy; he takes sweet wine with his oysters, and when the post has brought him letters that may actually decide

his destiny, he throws them aside to read a critique on the last ballet, or revive his recollections of its delight by gazing on a coloured print of the ballerina."

"I'm getting tired of the Gitana," said Pracontal throwing the picture from him; "hand me the chocolate. As to the letters, I have kept them for you to read, for, although I know your spluttering, splashing, hissing language for all purposes of talk, its law jargon is quite beyond me."

"Your lawyer—so far as I have seen—is most careful in his avoidance of technicals with you; he writes clearly and succinctly."

"Break open that great packet, and tell me about its clear and distinct contents."

"I said succinct, not distinct, O man of many mistakes. This is from Kelson himself, and contains an enclosure." He broke the seal as he spoke, and read,—

"DEAR SIR,—I AM exceedingly distressed to be obliged to inform you that the arrangement which, in my last letter, I had understood to be finally and satisfactorily concluded between myself on your part, and Mr. Sedley of Furnival's Inn, on the part of Mr. Bramleigh, is now rescinded and broken, Mr. Bramleigh having entered a formal protest, denying all concurrence or approval, and in evidence of his dissent has actually given notice of action against his solicitor, for unauthorized procedure. The bills therefore drawn by you I herewith return as no longer negociable. I am forced to express not only my surprise, but my indignation, at the mode in which we have been treated in this transaction. Awaiting your instructions as to what step you will deem it advisable to take next,—

"I am, dear sir, your obedient servant,

"J. KELSON."

"This is a bad affair," said Longworth. "That twenty thousand that you thought to have lived on for two years, astonishing the vulgar world, like some Count of Monte Christo, has proved a dissolving view, and there you sit a candidate for one of the Pope's prisons, which, if accounts speak truly, are about the vilest dens of squalor and misery in Europe."

"Put a lump of ice in my glass, and fill it up with champagne. It was only yesterday I was thinking whether

I'd not have myself christened Esau, and it is such a relief to me now to feel that I need not. Monsieur Le Comte Pracontal de Bramleigh, I have the honour to drink your health." As he spoke he drained his glass, and held it out to be refilled.

"No; I'll give you no more wine. You'll need all the calm and consideration you can command to answer this letter, which requires prompt reply. And as to Esau, my friend, the parallel scarcely holds, for when he negotiated the sale of his reversion he was next of kin beyond dispute."

"I wonder what would become of you if you could not cavil. I never knew any man so fond of a contradiction."

"Be just, and admit that you give me some splendid opportunities. No, I'll not let you have more wine. Kelson's letter must be answered, and we must think seriously over what is to be done."

"*Ma foi!* there is nothing to be done. Mr. Bramleigh challenges me to a duel, because he knows I have no arms. He appeals to the law, which is the very costliest of all the costly things in your dear country. If you could persuade him to believe that this is not fair—not even generous—perhaps he would have the good manners to quit the premises and send me the key. Short of that, I see nothing to be done."

"I have told you already, and I tell you once more, if Kelson is of opinion that your case is good enough to go to trial, you shall not want funds to meet law expenses."

"He has told me so, over and over. He has said he shall try the case by—what is it you call it?"

"I know what you mean; he will proceed by ejectment to try title."

"This need not cost very heavily, and will serve to open the campaign. He will put me on 'the table,' as he calls it, and I shall be interrogated, and worried, and tormented—perhaps, too, insulted, at times; and I am to keep my temper, resent nothing—not even when they impugn my honour or my truthfulness—for that there are two grand principles of British law; one is, no man need say any ill of himself, nor is he ever to mind what ill another may say of him."

"Did he tell you that?" said Longworth, laughing.

"Not exactly in these words, but it amounted to the same. Do give me a little wine; I am hoarse with talking."

"Not a drop. Tell me now, where are these letters, and that journal of your grandfather's that you showed me?"

"Kelson has them all. Kelson has everything. When I believed the affair to be ended, I told him he might do what he pleased with them, if he only restored to me that coloured sketch of my beautiful grandmother."

"There, there! don't get emotional, or I have done with you. I will write to Kelson to-day. Leave all to us and don't meddle in any way."

"That you may rely upon with confidence. No one ever yet accused me of occupying myself with anything I could possibly avoid. Do you want me any more?"

"I don't think so; but why do you ask? Where are you going?"

"I have a rendezvous this morning. I am to be three miles from this at one o'clock. I am to be at the tomb of Cecilia Metella, to meet the Lady Augusta Bramleigh, with a large party, on horseback, and we are to go somewhere and see something, and to dine, *ma foi*—I forget where."

"I think, all things considered," said Longworth, gravely, "I would advise some reserve as to intimacy with that family."

"You distrust my discretion. You imagine that in my unguarded freedom of talking I shall say many things which had been better unsaid; isn't that so?"

"Perhaps I do; at all events, I know the situation is one that would be intolerable to myself."

"Not to *me* though, not to *me*. It is the very difficulty, the tension, so to say, that makes it enticing. I have I cannot tell you what enjoyment in a position where, by the slightest movement to this side or that, you lose your balance and fall. I like—I delight in the narrow path with the precipice at each hand, where a false step is destruction. The wish to live is never so strong as when life is in danger."

"You are a heart and soul gambler."

"Confess, however, I am *beau joueur*. I know how to lose." And muttering something over the lateness of the hour, he snatched up his hat and hurried away.

As Pracontal was hurrying to the place of meeting with all the speed of his horse, a servant met him with a note from Lady Augusta. "She did not feel well enough," she said, "for a ride; she had a headache, and begged he would come and pay her a visit, and dine too, if he was not afraid of a dinner *en tête-à-tête*."

Overjoyed with the familiar tone of this note, he hurried back to Rome, and soon found himself in the little drawing-

room which looked out upon the Borghese garden, and where a servant told him her ladyship would soon appear.

"This is very kind of you and very nice," said she, entering and giving him her hand in a languid sort of manner, "to come here and give up the delights of the picnic, with its pretty women and champagne, and *patés-aux-truffes*. No; you are to sit yonder. I don't know you long enough to advance you to the privilege of that low chair next my sofa."

"I am your slave, even to martyrdom," said he, bowing, and sitting down where she had bid him.

"You are aware, I hope," said she, in the same wearied tone, "that it is very wrong of us to become acquainted. That, connected as I am with the Bramleighs, I ought not to have permitted you to be presented to me. My sister is shocked at the impropriety, and as for Lord and Lady Culduff, rather than meet you at dinner on Friday they have left Rome."

"Left Rome?"

"Yes, gone to Naples. To be sure, he ought to have been there a month ago; he was accredited to that Court, and he had nothing to do here, which was, however to *him* an excellent reason for being here. Why do you make me talk so much? it sets my head splitting, and I sent for you to listen to you, and not to have any worry of talking myself—there, begin."

"What shall I talk about?"

"Anything you like, only not politics, or religion, or literature, or fine arts—people are so unnatural when they discuss these; nor—not society and gossip, for then they grow spiteful and ill-natured; nor about myself, for then you'd fancy you were in love with me, and I'd have to shut the door against you. Oh, how my head aches! Give me that flacon, pray; thanks, now go back to your place."

"Shall I read to you?"

"No: there's nothing I detest so much as being read to. One never follows the book; it is the tone and accent of the reader, something in his voice, something one fancies an affectation attracts attention, and you remark how his hair is parted, or how his boots are made. Oh, why *will* you torment me this way—I don't want to talk and you persist in asking me questions."

"If you had not a headache I'd sing for you."

"No, I'll not let you sing to me alone; that would be

quite wrong. Remember, monsieur, and when I say remember, I mean never forget, I am excessively prude; not of that school of prudery that repels, but of that higher tone which declares a freedom impossible. Do you comprehend?"

"Perfectly, madame," said he, bowing with an air of an ideal reverence.

"Now, then, that we have settled the preliminaries of our —oh, dear!" burst she out, "see what it is to be speaking French! I had almost said of 'our friendship.'"

"And why not, madame? Can you possibly entertain a doubt of that sentiment, at once devoted and respectful, which has brought me to your feet?"

"I never do doubt about anything that I want to believe; at least till I change my mind on it, for I am—yes, I am very capricious. I am charmed with you to-day; but do not be surprised if my servant shuts the door against you to-morrow."

"Madame, you drive me to the brink of despair."

"I'm sure of that," said she, laughing. "I have driven several that far; but, strange to say, I never knew one who went over."

"Do not push torture to insufferance, madame," cried he, theatrically; but, instead of laughing at him, she looked really alarmed at his words.

"Oh, Monsieur Pracontal," cried she, suddenly, "was that little song you sung last night your own? I mean words and music both?"

He bowed with an air of modesty.

"What a nice talent, to be able to compose and write verses too! But they tell me you are horribly satirical; that you make rhymes on people impromptu, and sing them in the very room with them."

"Only madame, when they are, what you call in English, bores."

"But I like bores, they are so nice and dull. Do you know, Monsieur Pracontal, if it were not for bores, we English would have no distinctive nationality? Our bores are essentially our own, and unlike all the other species of the creature elsewhere."

"I respect them, and I bow to their superiority."

"It was very kind, very nice of you, to give up your ride over the Campagna, and come here to sit with me in one of my dull moods, for to-day I am very dull and dispirited. I

have an odious headache, and my sister has been scolding me, and I have had such unpleasant letters. Altogether, it is a dark day with me."

"I am inexpressibly grieved."

"Of course you are; and so I told my sister you would be, when she said it was a great imprudence on my part to admit you. Not that I don't agree with her in great part, but I do detest being dictated to; isn't it insupportable?"

"Quite so; the very worst form of slavery."

"It's true you want to take away the Bramleigh estates; but, as I said to my sister, does not every one wish to win when he plays a game, and do you detest your adversary for so natural a desire? I suppose if you have a trump more than the Bramleighs you'll carry off the stakes."

"Ah, madame, how glad would I be to lay my cards on the table, if I could be sure of such an opponent as yourself."

"Yes, I *am* generous. It's the one thing I can say for myself. I'm all for fighting the battle of life honourably and courteously, though I must say one is sure to lose where the others are not equally high-minded. Now I put it to yourself, M. Pracontal, and I ask, was it fair, was it honest, was it decent of Colonel Bramleigh, knowing the insecure title by which he held his estate, to make me his wife? You know, of course, the difference of rank that separated us; you know who I was — I can't say am, because my family have never forgiven me the mésalliance; therefore, I say, was it not atrocious in him to make a settlement which he felt must be a mockery?"

"Perhaps, madame, he may have regarded our pretensions as of little moment; indeed, I believe, he treated my father's demands with much hauteur."

"Still, he knew there was a claim, and a claimant, when he married *me*, and this can neither be denied nor defended."

"Ah, madame!" sighed he, "who would be stopped by scruples in such a cause?"

"No, there was nothing of love in it; he wanted rank, he wanted high connections. He was fond of me, after his fashion, I've no doubt, but he was far more proud than fond. I often fancied he must have had something on his mind, he would be so abstracted at times, and so depressed, and then he would seem as if he wanted to tell me a secret, but had not the courage for it, and I set it down to something quite different. I thought—no matter what I thought—but it

gave me no uneasiness, for, of course, I never dreamed of being jealous; but that it should be so bad as this never occurred to me—never!"

"I am only surprised that Colonel Bramleigh never thought it worth his while to treat with my father, who, all things considered, would have been easily dealt with; he was always a *pauvre diable*, out of one scrape to fall into another; so reckless that the very smallest help ever seemed to him quite sufficient to brave life with."

"I know nothing of the story, tell it to me."

"It is very long, very tiresome, and encumbered with details of dates and eras. I doubt you'd have patience for it, but if you think you would, I'm ready."

"Begin, then, only don't make it more confused or more tangled than you can help; and give me no dates—I hate dates."

Pracontal was silent for a moment or two as if reflecting, and then, drawing his chair a little nearer to her sofa, he leaned his forehead on his hand, and in a low, but distinct voice, began:—

"When Colonel Bramleigh's father was yet a young man, a matter of business required his presence in Ireland; he came to see a very splendid mansion then being built by a rich nobleman, on which his house had advanced a large sum by way of mortgage."

"Mon cher M. Pracontal, must we begin so far back? It is like the Plaideur in Molière who commences, 'Quand je vois le soleil, quand je vois la lune—'"

"Very true, but I must begin at the beginning of all things, and, with a little patience, I'll soon get further. Mr. Montague Bramleigh made acquaintance in Ireland with a certain Italian painter called Giacomo Lami, who had been brought over from Rome to paint the frescoes of this great house. This Lami—very poor and very humble, ignoble, if you like to say so—had a daughter of surpassing beauty. She was so very lovely that Giacomo was accustomed to introduce her into almost all his frescoes, for she had such variety of expression, so many *reflets*, as one may say, of character in her look, that she was a Madonna here, a Flora there, now a Magdalene, now a Dido; but you need not take my word for it, here she is as a Danae." And he opened his watch-case as he spoke, and displayed a small miniature in enamel of marvellous beauty and captivation.

"Oh, was she really like this?"

"That was copied from a picture of her at St. Servain, when she was eighteen, immediately before she accompanied her father to Ireland; and in Giacomo's sketch-book, which I hope one of these days to have the honour of showing to you, there is a memorandum saying that this portrait of Enrichetta was the best likeness of her he had ever made. He had a younger daughter called Carlotta, also handsome, but vastly inferior in beauty to my grandmother."

"Your grandmother?"

"Forgive me, madame, if I have anticipated; but Enrichetta Lami became the wife of Montague Bramleigh. The young man, captivated by her marvellous beauty, and enchanted by a winning grace of manner, in which it appears she excelled, made his court to her and married her. The ceremony of marriage presented no difficulty, as Lami was a member of some sect of Waldensian Protestants, who claim a sort of affinity with the Anglican Church, and they were married in the parish church by the minister, and duly registered in the registry-book of the parish. All these matters are detailed in this book of Giacomo Lami's, which was at once account-book and sketch-book and journal, and, indeed, family history. It is a volume will, I am sure, amuse you, for, amongst sketches and studies for pictures, there are the drollest little details of domestic events, with passing notices of the political circumstances of the time—for old Giacomo was a conspirator and a Carbonaro, and heaven knows what else. He even involved himself in the Irish troubles, and was so far compromised that he was obliged to fly the country and get over to Holland, which he did, taking his two daughters with him. It has never been clearly ascertained whether Montague Bramleigh had quarrelled with his wife or consented to her accompanying her father, for, while there were letters from him to her full of affection and regard, there are some strange passages in Giacomo's diary that seem to hint at estrangement and coldness. When her child, my father, was born, she pressed Bramleigh strongly to come over to the christening; but, though he promised at first, and appeared overjoyed at the birth of his heir, he made repeated pretexts of this or that engagement, and ended by not coming. Old Lami must have given way to some outburst of anger at this neglect and desertion, for he sent back Bramleigh's letters unopened; and the poor Enrichetta, after struggling bravely for several months under this heartless and cruel treatment, sunk and died. The old man wandered away to-

wards the south of Europe after this, taking with him his grandchild and his remaining daughter; and the first entry we find in his diary is about three years later, where we read, 'Chambéry,—Must leave this, where I thought I had at last found a home. Niccolo Baldassare is bent on gaining Carlotta's affections. Were they to marry it would be the ruin of both. Each has the same faults as the other.'

"And later on,—

"'Had an explanation with N. B., who declares that, with or without my consent, he will make C. his wife. I have threatened to bring him before the Council; but he defies me, and says he is ready to abandon the society rather than give her up. I must quit this secretly and promptly.'

"We next find him at Treviso, where he was painting the Basilica of St. Guedolfo, and here he speaks of himself as a lonely old man, deserted and forsaken, showing that his daughter had left him some time before. He alludes to offers that had been made him to go to England; but declares that nothing would induce him to set foot in that country more. One passage would imply that Carlotta, on leaving home, took her sister's boy with her, for in the old man's writing there are these words,—

"'I do not want to hear more of them; but I would wish tidings of the boy. I have dreamed of him twice.'

"From that time forth the journal merely records the places he stopped at, the works he was engaged in, and the sums he received in payment. For the most part, his last labours were in out-of-the-way, obscure spots, where he worked for mere subsistence; and of how long he lived there, and where he died, there is no trace.

"Do I weary you, my dear lady, with these small details of very humble people, or do you really bestow any interest on my story?"

"I like it of all things. I only want to follow Carlotta's history now, and learn what became of her."

"Of her fate and fortune I know nothing. Indeed, all that I have been telling you heretofore I have gleaned from that book and some old letters of my great-grandfather's. My own history I will not inflict upon you—at least not now. I was a student of the Naval College of Genoa till I was fourteen, and called Anatole Pracontal, 'dit' Lami; but who had entered me on the books of the college, who paid for me or interested himself about me, I never knew.

"A boyish scrape I fell into induced me to run away from

the college. I took refuge in a small felucca, which landed me at Algiers, where I entered the French service, and made two campaigns with Pélissier; and only quitted the army on learning that my father had been lost at sea, and had bequeathed me some small property, then in the hands of a banker at Naples.

"The property was next to nothing, but by the papers and letters that I found, I learned who I was, and to what station and fortune I had legitimate claim. It seems a small foundation, perhaps, to build upon; but remember how few the steps are in reality, and how direct besides. My grandmother, Enrichetta, was the married wife of Montagu Bramleigh; her son—Godfrey Lami at his birth, but afterwards known by many aliases—married my mother, Marie de Pracontal, a native of Savoy, where I was born, the name Pracontal being given me. My father's correspondence with the Bramleighs was kept up at intervals during his life, and frequent mention is made in diaries, as well as the banker's books, of sums of money received by him from them. In Bolton's hands, also, was deposited my father's will, where he speaks of me and the claim which I should inherit on the Bramleigh estates; and he earnestly entreats Bolton, who had so often befriended him, to succour his poor boy, and not leave him without help and counsel in the difficulties that were before him.

"Have you followed, or can you follow, the tangled scheme?" cried he, after a pause; "for you are either very patient or completely exhausted—which is it?"

"But why have you taken the name of Pracontal, and not your real name, Bramleigh?" asked she, eagerly.

"By Bolton's advice, in the first instance, he wisely taking into account how rich the family were whose right I was about to question, and how poor I was. Bolton inclined to a compromise, and, indeed, he never ceased to press upon me that it would be the fairest and most generous of all arrangements; but that to effect this, I must not shock the sensibilities of the Bramleighs by assuming their name—that to do so was to declare war at once."

"And yet had you called yourself Bramleigh, you would have warned others that the right of the Bramleighs to this estate was at least disputed."

Pracontal could scarcely repress a smile at a declaration so manifestly prompted by selfish considerations; but he made no reply.

"Well, and this compromise, do they agree to it?" asked she, hastily.

"Some weeks ago, I believed it was all concluded; but this very morning my lawyer's letter tells me that Augustus Bramleigh will not hear of it, that he is indignant at the very idea, and that the law alone must decide between us."

"What a scandal!"

"So I thought. Worse, of course, for them, who are in the world and well known. I am a nobody."

"A nobody, who might be somebody to-morrow," said she, slowly and deliberately.

"After all, the stage of pretension is anything but pleasant, and I cannot but regret that we have not come to some arrangement."

"Can *I* be of use? Could *my* services be employed to any advantage?"

"At a moment, I cannot answer; but I am very grateful for even the thought."

"I cannot pretend to any influence with the family. Indeed, none of them ever liked me; but they might listen to me, and they might also believe that *my* interest went with their own. Would you like to meet Augustus Bramleigh?"

"There is nothing I desire so much."

"I'll not promise he'll come; but if he should consent, will you come here on Tuesday morning—say, at eleven o'clock—and meet him? I know he's expected at Albano by Sunday, and I'll have a letter to propose the meeting, in his hands, on his arrival."

"I have no words to speak my gratitude to you."

CHAPTER XLIII.

A SPECIAL MISSION.

When a very polite note from Lord Culduff to Mr. Cutbill expressed the deep regret he felt at not being able to receive that gentleman at dinner, as an affair of much moment required his immediate presence at Naples, the noble lord was more correct than it was his usual fate to be in matters of apology. The fact was, that his lordship had left England several weeks before, charged with a most knotty and difficult mission to the Neapolitan court; and though the question involved the misery of imprisonment to some of the persons concerned, and had called forth more than one indignant appeal for information in the House, the great diplomatist sauntered leisurely over the Continent, stopping to chat with a Minister here, or dine with a reigning Prince there, not suffering himself to be hurried by the business before him, or in any way influenced by the petulant despatches and telegrams which F. O. persistently sent after him.

One of his theories was, that in diplomacy everything should be done in a sort of dignified languor that excluded all thought of haste or of emergency. "Haste implies pressure," he would say, "and pressure means weakness: therefore, always seem slow, occasionally even to indolence."

There was no denying it, he was a great master in that school of his art which professed to baffle every effort at inquiry. No man ever wormed a secret from him that he desired to retain, or succeeded in entrapping him into any accidental admission. He could talk for hours with a frankness that was positively charming. He could display a candour that seemed only short of indiscretion; and yet, when you left him, you found you had carried away nothing beyond some neatly turned aphorisms, and a few very harmless imitations of Machiavelian subtlety. Like certain men who are fond of showing how they can snuff a candle with a bullet, he was continually exhibiting his skill at fence, with the added assurance that nothing would grieve him so ineffably as any display of his ability at your expense.

He knew well that these subtleties were no longer the mode; that men no longer tried to outwit each other in official intercourse; that the time for such feats of smartness had as much gone by as the age of high neckcloths and tight coats; but yet, as he adhered to the old dandyism of the Regency in his dress, he maintained the old traditions of finesse in his diplomacy, and could no more have been betrayed into a Truth than he could have worn a Jim Crow. For that mere plodding, commonplace race of men that now filled "the line" he had the most supreme contempt; men who had never uttered a smart thing, or written a clever one. Diplomacy without epigram was like a dinner without truffles. It was really pleasant to hear him speak of the great days of Metternich and Nesselrode and Talleyrand, when a frontier was settled by a *bon mot*, and a dynasty decided by a doggerel. The hoarse roar of the multitude had not in those times disturbed the polished solemnity of the council-chamber, and the high priests of statecraft celebrated their mysteries unmolested.

"The ninth telegram, my lord," said Temple, as he stood with a cipher dispatch in his hand, just as Lord Culduff had reached his hotel at Naples.

"Transcribe it, my dear boy, and let us hear it."

"I have, my lord. It runs, 'Where is the special envoy? Let him report himself by telegraph.'"

"Reply, 'At dinner, at the Hôtel Victoria; in passably good health, and indifferent spirits.'"

"But, my lord——"

"There, you'd better dress. You are always late. And tell the people here to serve oysters every day till I countermand them; and taste the Capri, please; I prefer it to Sauterne, if it be good. The telegram can wait."

"I was going to mention, my lord, that Prince Castelmuro has called twice to-day, and begged he might be informed of your arrival. Shall I write him a line?"

"No. The request must be replied to by him to whom it was addressed—the landlord, perhaps, or the *laquais-de-place*."

"The King is most anxious to learn if you have come."

"His Majesty shall be rewarded for his courteous impatience. I shall ask an audience to-morrow."

"They told me dinner was served," said Lady Culduff, angrily, as she entered the room, dressed as if for a court entertainment; "and I hurried down without putting on my gloves."

"Let me kiss your ladyship's hand so temptingly displayed," said he, stooping and pressing it to his lips.

An impatient gesture of the shoulder, and a saucy curl of the lip were the only response to this gallantry.

A full half-hour before Lord Culduff appeared Temple Bramleigh re-entered, dressed for dinner.

"Giacomo is at his old tricks, Temple," said she, as she walked the room impatiently. "His theory is that every one is to be in waiting on my lord; and I have been here now close on three-quarters of an hour, expecting dinner to be announced. Will you please to take some trouble about the household, or let us have an attaché who will?"

"Giacomo is impossible—that's the fact; but it's no use saying so."

"I know that," said she, with a malicious twinkle of the eye. "The man who is so dexterous with rouge and pomatum cannot be spared. But can you tell me, Temple, why we came here? There was no earthly reason to quit a place that suited us perfectly because Lady Augusta Bramleigh wished to do us an impertinence."

"Oh, but we ought to have been here six weeks ago. They are frantic at 'the Office' at our delay, and there will be a precious to-do about it in the House."

"Culduff likes that. If he has moments that resemble happiness they are those when he is so palpably in the wrong that they would ruin any other man than himself."

"Well, he has got one of them now, I can tell you."

"Oh, I am aware of what you diplomatic people call great emergencies, critical conjunctures, and the like; but as Lord Watermore said the other evening, 'all your falls are like those in the circus—you always come down upon sawdust.'"

"There's precious little saw-dust here. It's a case will make a tremendous noise in England. When a British subject has been ironed and——"

"Am I late? I shall be in despair, my lady, if I have kept you waiting," said Lord Culduff, entering in all the glory of red ribbon and Guelph, and with an unusually brilliant glow of youth and health in his features.

It was with a finished gallantry that he offered his arm; and his smile, as he led her to the dinner-room, was triumph itself. What a contrast to the moody discontent on *her* face; for she did not even affect to listen to his excuses, or bestow the slightest attention on his little flatteries and compliments. During the dinner Lord Culduff alone spoke. He was agree-

able after his manner, which was certainly a very finished manner; and he gave little reminiscences of the last time he had been at Naples, and the people he had met, sketching their eccentricities and oddities most amusingly, for he was a master in those light touches of satire which deal with the ways of society, and, perhaps, to any one but his wife he would have been most entertaining and pleasant. She never deigned the very faintest recognition of what he said. She neither smiled when he was witty, nor looked shocked at his levities. Only once, when, by a direct appeal to her, silence was impossible, she said, with a marked spitefulness, "You are talking of something very long ago. I think I heard of that when I was a child." There was a glow under his lordship's rouge as he raised his glass to his lips, and an almost tremor in his voice when he spoke again.

"I'm afraid you don't like Naples, my lady?"

"I detest it."

"The word is strong; let it be my care to try and induce you to recall it."

"It will be lost time, my lord. I always hated the place and the people too."

"You were pleased with Rome, I think?"

"And that possibly was the reason we left it. I mean," said she, blushing with shame at the rudeness that had escaped her, "I mean that one is always torn away from the place they are content to live in. It is the inevitable destiny."

"Very pleasant claret that for hotel wine," said Lord Culduff, passing the bottle to Temple. "The small race of travellers who frequent the Continent now rarely call for the better wines, and the consequence is that Margaux and Marcobrunner get that time to mature in the cellars, which was denied to them in former times."

A complete silence now ensued. At last Lord Culduff said "Shall we have coffee?" and offering his arm with the same courteous gallantry as before, he led Lady Culduff into the drawing-room, bowing as he relinquished her hand, as though he stood in presence of a queen. "I know you are very tolerant," said he, with a bewitching smile, "and as we shall have no visitors this evening, may I ask the favour of being permitted a cigarette—only one?"

"As many as you like. I am going to my room, my lord." And ere he could hasten to open the door, she swept haughtily out of the room and disappeared.

"We must try and make Naples pleasant for my lady,"

said Lord Culduff, as he drew his chair to the fire; but there was, somehow, a malicious twinkle in his eye and a peculiar curl of the lip as he spoke that scarcely vouched for the loyalty of his words; and that Temple heard him with distrust seemed evident by his silence. "You'd better go over to the Legation and say we have arrived. If Blagden asks when he may call, tell him at two to-morrow. Let them send over all the correspondence; and I think we shall want some one out of the chancellerie. Whom have they got? Throw your eye over the list."

Opening a small volume bound in red morocco, Temple read out, "Mininster and envoy, Sir Geoffrey Blagden, K.C.B.; first secretary, Mr. Tottenham; second secretaries, Ralph Howard, the Hon. Edward Eccles, and W. Thornton; third secretary, George Hilliard; attaché, Christopher Stepney."

"I only know one of these men; indeed, I can scarcely say I know him. I knew his father, or his grandfather perhaps. At all events, take some one who writes a full hand, with the letters very upright, and who seldom speaks, and never has a cold in his head."

"You don't care for any one in particular?" asked Temple, meekly.

"Of course not; no more than for the colour of the horse in a hansom. If Blagden hints anything about dining with him, say I don't dine out; though I serve her Majesty, I do not mean to destroy my constitution; and I know what a Legation dinner means, with a Scotchman for the chief of the mission. I'm so thankful he's not married, or we should have his wife calling on my lady. You can dine there if you like; indeed, perhaps, you ought. If Blagden has an opera-box, say my lady likes the theatre. I think that's all. Stay, don't let him pump you about my going to Vienna; and drop in on me when you come back."

Lord Culduff was fast asleep in a deep arm-chair before his dressing-room fire when Temple returned. The young man looked wearied and worn out, as well he might; for the Minister had insisted on going over the whole "question" to him, far less, indeed, for his information or instruction, than to justify every step the Legation had taken, and to show the utter unfairness and ungenerosity of the Foreign Office in sending out a special mission to treat a matter which the accredited envoy was already bringing to a satisfactory conclusion.

"No, no, my dear boy, no blue-books, no correspondence. I shook my religious principles in early life by reading Gibbon, and I never was quite sure of my grammar since I studied diplomatic despatches. Just tell me the matter as you'd tell a scandal or a railway accident."

"Where shall I begin then?"

"Begin where *we* come in."

"Ah, but I can't tell where that is. You know, of course, that there was a filibustering expedition which landed on the coast, and encountered the revenue guard, and overpowered them, and were in turn attacked, routed, and captured by the Royal troops."

"Ta, ta, ta! I don't want all that. Come down to the events of June—June 27 they call it."

"Well, it was on that day when the *Ercole* was about to get under weigh, with two hundred of these fellows sentenced to the galleys for life, that a tremendous storm broke over the Bay of Naples. Since the memorable hurricane of '92 there had been nothing like it. The sea-wall of the Chiaja was washed away, and a frigate was cast on shore at Caserta with her bowsprit in the palace windows; all the lower town was under water, and many lives lost. But the damage at sea was greatest of all: eight fine ships were lost, the crews having, with some few exceptions, perished with them."

"Can't we imagine a great disaster—a very great disaster? I'll paint my own storm, so pray go on."

"Amongst the merchant shipping was a large American barque which rode out the gale, at anchor, for several hours; but, as the storm increased, her captain, who was on shore, made signal to the mate to slip his cable and run for safety to Castellamare. The mate, a young Englishman, named Rogers——"

"Samuel Rogers?"

"The same, my lord, though it is said not to be his real name. He, either misunderstanding the signal—or, as some say, wilfully mistaking its meaning—took to his launch, with the eight men he had with him, and rowed over to a small despatch-boat of the Royal Navy, which was to have acted as convoy to the *Ercole*, but whose officers were unable to get on board of her, so that she was actually under the command of a petty officer. Rogers boarded her, and proposed to the man in command to get up the steam and try to save the lives of the people who were perishing on every hand. He refused; an altercation ensued, and the English—for

they were all English—overpowered them and sent them below——"

"Don't say under hatches, my dear boy, or I shall expect to see you hitching your trousers next."

Temple reddened, but went on: "They got up steam in all haste, and raised their anchor, but only at the instant that the *Ercole* foundered, quite close to them, and the whole sea was covered with the soldiers and the galley-slaves, who had jumped overboard, and the ship went down. Rogers made for them at once and rescued above a hundred—chiefly of the prisoners—but he saved also many of the crew, and the soldiers. From four o'clock till nigh seven, he continued to cruise back and forward through the bay assisting every one who needed help, and saving life on every side. As the gale abated, yielding to the piteous entreaties of the prisoners, whom he well knew were political offenders, he landed them all near Baia, and was quietly returning to the mooring-ground whence he had taken the despatch-boat, when he was boarded by two armed boats' crews of the Royal Navy, ironed and carried off to prison.

"That will do, I know the rest. Blagden asked to have them tried in open court, and was told that the trial was over, and that they had been condmned to death, but the sentence was commuted by royal mercy to hard labour at the galleys. I knew your long story before you told it, but listened to hear what new element you might have interpolated since you saw the people at the Legation. I find you, on the whole, very correct. How the Neapolitan Government and H. M.'s Ministers have mistaken, mystified, and slanged each other; how they have misinterpreted law and confounded national right; how they have danced a reel through all justice, and changed places with each other some half-dozen times, so that an arbiter—if there were one—would put them both out of court—I have read already in the private correspondence. Even the people in Parliament, patent bunglers as they are in foreign customs, began to ask themselves, Is Filangieri in the pay of Her Majesty? and how comes it that Blagden is in the service of Naples?"

"Oh, it's not so bad as that!"

"Yes, it's fully as bad as that. Such a muddled correspondence was probably never committed to print. They thought it a controversy, but the combatants never confronted each other. One appealed to humanity, the other referred to the law; one went off in heroics about gallantry,

and the other answered by the galleys. People ought to be taught that diplomatists do not argue, or if they do, they are mere tyros at their trade. Diplomatists insinuate, suppose, suggest, hope, fear, and occasionally threaten; and with these they take in a tolerably wide sweep of human motives. There, go to bed now, my dear boy; you have had enough of precepts for one evening; tell Giacomo not to disturb me before noon—I shall probably write late into the night."

Temple bowed and took his leave, but scarcely had he reached the stairs than Lord Culduff laid himself in his bed and went off into a sound sleep. Whether his rest was disturbed by dreams; whether his mind went over the crushing things he had in store for the Neapolitan Minister, or the artful excuses he intended to write home; whether he composed sonorous sentences for a blue-book, or invented witty epigrams for a "private and confidential;" or whether he only dreamed of a new preparation of glycerine and otto of roses, which he had seen advertised as an "invaluable accessory to the toilet," this history does not, perhaps need not, record.

As, however, we are not about to follow the course of his diplomatic efforts in our next chapter, it is pleasant to take leave of him in his repose.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE CHURCH PATRONS.

As the season drew to its close at Albano, and the period of returning to Rome approached, the church committee, following the precedent of all previous years, fell out, and held a succession of vestry-meetings for mutual abuse and recrimination. Partisanship is the badge of church patrons, and while the parson had his adherents, and the organist his supporters, there were half a dozen very warm friends who advocated the cause of the bell-ringer—a drunken little heathen, who, because he had never crossed the threshold of a Catholic church for years, was given brevet rank as a member of the Reformed religion.

The time of auditing the church accounts is usually a sort of day of judgment on the clergyman. All the complaints that can be preferred against him are kept for that occasion. A laudable sentiment possibly prompts men to ascertain what they have got for their money; at all events, people in nowise remarkable for personal thrift show at such times a most searching spirit of inquiry, and eagerly investigate the cost of sweeping out the vestry and clear-starching the chaplain's bands.

As to the doctrine of the parson, and the value of his ministration, there were a variety of opinions. He was too high for this one, too dry for that; he was not impressive, not solemn nor dignified with some, while others deemed him deficient in that winning familiarity which is so soothing to certain sinners. Some thought his sermons too high-flown and too learned, others asked why he only preached to the children in the gallery. On one only point was there anything like unanimity: each man who withdrew his subscription did so on principle. None, not one, referred his determination to contribute no longer to any motive of economy. All declared that it was something in the celebration of the service—a doctrine inculcated in the pulpit—something the parson had said or something he had worn—obliged them, "with infinite regret," to withdraw what they invariably called "their

mite." In fact, one thing was clear: a more high-minded, right-judging, scrupulous body of people could not be found than the congregation, whatever might be said or thought of him whose duty it was to guide them.

Lady Augusta Bramleigh had gone off to Rome, and a small three-cornered note, highly perfumed, and most nervously written, informed the committee that she was quite ready to continue her former subscription, or more, if required; that she was charmed with the chaplain, pleased with the choir, and generally delighted with every one—a testimony more delicately valuable from the fact that she had been but once to the church during the entire season.

Sir Marcus Cluff, after reading out the letter, took occasion to observe on the ventilation of the church, which was defective in many respects. There was a man in King Street—he thought his name was Harmond or something like Harmond, but it might be Fox—who had invented a self-revolving pane for church windows; it was perfectly noiseless, and the cost a mere trifle, though it required to be adjusted by one of the patentee's own people; some mistakes having occurred by blundering adaptation, by which two persons had been asphyxiated at Redhill.

The orator was here interrupted by Mrs. Trumpler, who stoutly affirmed that she had come there that day at great inconvenience, and was in nowise prepared to listen to a discourse upon draughts, or the rival merits of certain plumbers. There were higher considerations than these that might occupy them, and she wished to know if Mr. L'Estrange was prepared to maintain the harsh, and she must say the ungenerous and unscholarlike view he had taken of the character of Judas. If so, she withdrew her subscription, but added that she would also in a pamphlet explain to the world the reasons of her retirement, as well as the other grounds of complaint she had against the chaplain.

One humble contributor of fifteen francs alleged that, though nutcrackers were a useful domestic implement, they formed an unpleasant accompaniment to the hymns, and occasionally startled devotionally minded persons during the service; and he added his profound regret at the seeming apathy of the clergyman to the indecent interruption; indeed, he had seen the parson sitting in the reading-desk, while these disturbances continued, to all appearance unmoved and indifferent.

A retired victualler, Mr. Mowser, protested that to see the

walk of the clergyman, as he came up the aisle, "was enough for *him;*" and he had only come to the meeting to declare that he himself had gone over to the sect of the Nuremberg Christians, who, at least, were humble-minded and lowly, and who thought their pastor handsomely provided for with a thousand francs a year and a suit of black clothes at Christmas.

In a word there was much discontent abroad, and a very general opinion seemed to prevail that, what with the increasing dearness of butchers' meat, and an extra penny lately added to the income-tax, it behoved every one to see what wise and safe economy could be introduced into their affairs. It is needless to say how naturally it suggested itself to each that the church subscription was a retrenchment at once practicable and endurable.

Any one who wishes to convince himself how dear to the Protestant heart is the right of private judgment, has only to attend a vestry meeting of a church supported on the voluntary system. It is the very grandest assertion of that great principle. There is not a man there represented by ten francs annual subscription who has not very decided opinions of the doctrine he requires for his money; and thus, while no one agreed with his neighbour, all concurred in voting that they deemed the chaplain had not fulfilled their expectations, and that they reserved their right to contribute or not for the ensuing year, as future thought and consideration should determine.

L'Estrange had gone into Rome to meet Augustus Bramleigh and Ellen, who were coming to pass the Christmas with him, when Sir Marcus Cluff called to announce this unpleasant resolution of the Church patrons.

"Perhaps I could see Miss L'Estrange?" said he to the servant, who had said her master was from home.

Julia was seated working at the window as Sir Marcus entered the room.

"I hope I do not come at an unseemly hour; I scarcely know the time one ought to visit here," he began, as he fumbled to untie the strings of his respirator. "How nice and warm your room is; and a south aspect, too. Ah! that's what my house fails in."

"I'm so sorry my brother is not at home, Sir Marcus. He will regret not meeting yon."

"And I'm sorry, too. I could have broken the bad news to him, perhaps, better than—I mean—oh, dear! if I begin

coughing, I shall never cease. Would you mind my taking my drops? They are only aconite and lettuce; and if I might ask for a little fresh water. I'm so sorry to be troublesome."

Though all anxiety to know to what bad news he referred, she hastened to order the glass of water he desired, and calmly resumed her seat.

"It's spasmodic, this cough. I don't know if that be any advantage, or the reverse; but the doctor says 'only spasmodic,' which would lead one to suppose it might be worse. Would you do me the great favour to drop thirty-five, be sure only thirty-five, of these? I hope your hand does not shake?"

"No, Sir Marcus. It is very steady."

"What a pretty hand it is! How taper your fingers are but you have these dimples at the knuckles they say are such signs of cruelty."

"Oh, Sir Marcus!"

"Yes, they say so. Nana Sahib had them, and that woman —there, there, you have given me thirty-seven."

"No, I assure you, Sir Marcus; only thirty-five. I'm a practised hand at dropping medicine. My brother used to have violent head-aches."

"And you always measured his drops, did you?"

"Always. I'm quite a clever nurse, I assure you."

"Oh, dear! do you say so?" And as he laid down his glass he looked at her with an expression of interest and admiration, which pushed her gravity to its last limit.

"I don't believe a word about the cruelty they ascribe to those dimples. I pledge you my word of honour I do not," said he, seriously.

"I'm sincerely glad to hear you say so," said she, trying to seem grave.

"And is your brother much of an invalid?"

"Not now. The damp climate of Ireland gave him head-aches, but he rarely has them here."

"Ah, and you have such a quiet way of moving about; that gentle gliding step, so soothing to the sick. Oh, you don't know what a boon it is; and the common people never have it, nor can they acquire it. When you went to ring the bell, I said to myself, 'That's it: that's what all the teaching in the world cannot impart.'"

"You will make me very vain, Sir Marcus. All the more that you give me credit for merits I never suspected."

"Have you a cold hand?" asked he, with a look of eagerness.

"I really don't know. Perhaps I have."

"If I might dare. Ah," said he, with much feeling, as he touched her hand in the most gentle manner—"Ah! that is the greatest gift of nature. A small hand, perfect in form, beautiful in colour, and cold as marble."

Julia could resist no longer, but laughed out one of those pleasant merry laughs whose music make an echo in the heart.

"I know well enough what you are saying to yourself. I think I hear you muttering, 'What an original, what a strange creature it is;' and so I am, I won't deny it. One who has been an invalid for eighteen years; eighteen years passed in the hard struggle with an indolent alimentary system, for they say it's no more. There's nothing organic; nothing whatever. Structurally, said Dr. Borcas of Leamington, structurally you are as sound as a roach. I don't fully appreciate the comparison, but I take it the roach must be a very healthy fish. Oh, here's your brother coming across the garden. I wish he had not come just yet; I had a—no matter, perhaps you'd permit me to have a few words with you to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, or whenever you like, Sir Marcus, but pray forgive me if I run away now to ask my brother if our visitors have come."

"They'll be here to-morrow evening, Ju," said George, as she rushed to meet him. "Is that Cluff's phaeton I see at the gate?"

"Yes; the tiresome creature has been here the last hour. I'll not go back to him. You must take your share now."

By the time L'Estrange entered the room, Sir Marcus had replaced his respirator, and enveloped himself in two of his overcoats and a fur boa. "Oh, here you are," said he, speaking with much difficulty. "I can't talk now; it brings on the cough. Come over in the evening, and I'll tell you about it."

"About what pray?" asked the other, curtly.

"There's no use being angry. It only hurries the respiration, and chokes the pulmonary vessels. They won't give a sixpence—not one of them. They say that you don't preach St. Paul—that you think too much about works. I don't know what they don't say; but come over about seven."

"Do you mean that the subscribers have withdrawn from the church?"

Sir Marcus had not breath for further discussion, but made a gesture of assent with his head.

L'Estrange sank down on a chair overpowered, nor did he speak to, or notice, the other as he withdrew.

"Are you ill, dearest George?" said Julia, as she saw her brother pale and motionless on the chair. "Are you ill?"

"They've all withdrawn from the church, Julia. Cluff says they are dissatisfied with me, and will contribute no longer."

"I don't believe it's so bad as he says. I'm sure it's not. They cannot be displeased with you, George. It's some mere passing misconception. You know how they're given to these little bickerings and squabbles; but they have ever been kind and friendly to you."

"You always give me courage, Ju; and even when I have little heart for it, I like it."

"Come in to dinner now, George; and if I don't make you laugh, it's a wonder to me. I have had such a scene with Sir Marcus as might have graced a comedy."

It was not an easy task to rally her brother back to good spirits, but she did succeed at last. "And now," said she, as she saw him looking once more at ease and cheerful, "what news of the Bramleighs—are they ever to come?"

"They'll be here to-morrow evening, Ju. Unless they were quite sure the Culduffs had left for Naples, they would not venture here; and perhaps they were so far in the right."

"I don't think so; at least, if I had been Nelly, I'd have given anything for such an opportunity of presenting myself to my distinguished relations and terrifying them by the thought of those attentions that they can neither give me nor deny me."

"No, no, Julia, nothing of the kind; there would be malice in that."

"Do I deny it? A great deal of malice in it, and there's no good comedy in life without a slight flavour of spitefulness. Oh, my poor dear George, what a deep sigh that was! How sad it is to think that all your example and all your precept do so little, and that your sister acquires nothing by your companionship except the skill to torment you."

"But why will you say those things that you don't mean —that you couldn't feel?"

"I believe I do it, George, just the way a horse bounds

and rears and buck-leaps. It does not help him on his road, but it lightens the journey; and then it offers such happy occasion for the exercise of that nice light hand of my brother to check these aberrations. You ought to be eternally grateful for the way I develop your talents as a moralist—I was going to say a horse-breaker."

"I suppose," said he, after a moment's silence, "I ought to go over to Sir Marcus and learn from him exactly how matters stand here."

"No, no; never mind him—at least, not this evening. Bores are bad enough in the morning, but after dinner, when one really wants to think well of their species, they are just intolerable; besides, I composed a little song while you were away, and I want you to hear it, and then you know we must have some serious conversation about Sir Marcus; he is to be here to-morrow."

"I declare, Ju——"

"There, don't declare, but open the pianoforte, and light the candles; and as I mean to sing for an hour at least, you may have that cigar that you looked so lovingly at, and put back into the case. Ain't I good for you, as the French say?"

"Very good, too good for me," said he, kissing her, and now every trace of his sorrow was gone, and he looked as happy as might be.

CHAPTER XLV.

A PLEASANT DINNER.

PRUDENT people will knit their brows and wise people shake their heads at the bare mention of it, but I cannot help saying that there is a wonderful fascination in those little gatherings which bring a few old friends around the same board, who, forgetting all the little pinchings and straits of narrow fortune, give themselves up for once to enjoyment without a thought for the cost or a care for the morrow. I do not want this to pass for sound morality, nor for a discreet line of conduct; I only say that in the spirit that can subdue every sentiment that would jar on the happiness of the hour there is a strength and vitality that shows this feeling is not born of mere conviviality, but of something deeper, and truer, and heartier.

"If we only had poor Jack here," whispered Augustus Bramleigh to L'Estrange, as they drew around the Christmas fire, "I'd say this was the happiest hearth I know of."

"And have you no tidings of him?" said L'Estrange, in the same low tone; for, although the girls were in eager talk together, he was afraid Julia might overhear what was said.

"None, except that he sailed from China on board an American clipper for Smyrna, and I am now waiting for news from the consul there, to whom I have written, enclosing a letter for him."

"And he is serving as a sailor?"

Bramleigh nodded.

"What is the mysterious conversation going on there?" said Julia. "How grave George looks, and Mr. Bramleigh seems overwhelmed with a secret of importance."

"I guess it," said Nelly, laughing. "Your brother is relating your interview with Sir Marcus Cluff, and they are speculating on what is to come of it."

"Oh, that reminds me," cried L'Estrange, suddenly, "Sir Marcus's servant brought me a letter just as I was dressing for dinner. Here it is. What a splendid seal—supporters too! Have I permission to read?"

"Read, read by all means," cried Julia.

"'DEAR SIR,—If I could have sufficiently conquered my bronchitis as to have ventured out this morning, I would have made you my personal apologies for not having received you last night when you did me the honour to call, as well as opened to you by word of mouth what I am now reduced to convey by pen.'"

"He is just as prolix as when he talks," said Julia.

"It's a large hand, however, and easy to read. 'My old enemy the larynx—more in fault than even the bronchial tubes—is again in arms——'"

"Oh, do spare us his anatomical disquisition, George. Skip him down to where he proposes for me."

"But it is what he does not. You are not mentioned in the whole of it. It is all about church matters. It is an explanation of why every one has withdrawn his subscription and left the establishment, and why he alone is faithful and willing to contribute, even to the extent of five pounds additional——"

"This is too heartless by half; the man has treated me shamefully."

"I protest I think so too," said Nelly, with a mock seriousness; "he relies upon your brother's gown for his protection."

"Shall I have him out? But, by the way, why do you call me Mr. Bramleigh? Wasn't I Augustus—or rather Gusty—when we met last?"

"I don't think so; so well as I remember, I treated you with great respect dashed with a little bit of awe. You and your elder sister were always 'personages' to me.

"I cannot understand that. I can easily imagine Temple inspiring that deference you speak of."

"You were the true prince, however, and I had all Falstaff's reverence for the true prince."

"And yet you see after all I am like to turn out only a pretender."

"By the way, the pretender is here; I mean—if it be not a bull to say it—the real pretender, Count Pracontal."

"Count Pracontal de Bramleigh, George," said Julia, correcting him. "It is the drollest mode of assuming a family name I ever heard of."

"What is he like?" asked Ellen.

"Like a very well-bred Frenchman of the worst school of French manners: he has none of that graceful ease and that

A PLEASANT DINNER.

placid courtesy of the past period, but he has abundance of the volatile readiness and showy smartness of the present day. They are a wonderful race, however, and their smattering is better than other men's learning."

"I want to see him," said Augustus.

"Well," broke in L'Estrange, "Lady Augusta writes to me to say he wants to see *you*."

"What does Lady Augusta know of him?"

"Heaven knows," cried Julia; "but they are always together; their rides over the Campagna furnish just now the chief scandal of Rome. George, you may see, looks very serious and rebukeful about it; but, if the truth were told there's a little jealousy at the root of his morality."

"I declare, Julia, this is too bad."

"Too true, also, my dear George. Will you deny that you used to ride out with her nearly every evening in the summer, rides that began at sunset and ended—I was always asleep when you came home, and so I never knew when they ended."

"Was she very agreeable?" asked Nelly, with the faintest tinge of sharpness in her manner.

"The most—what shall I call it?—inconsequent woman I ever met, mixing up things the most dissimilar together, and never dwelling for an instant on anything."

"How base men are," said Julia, with mock reproach in her voice. "This is the way he talks of a woman he absolutely persecuted with attentions the whole season. Would you believe it, Nelly, we cut up our nice little garden to make a school to train her horse in?"

Whether it was that some secret intelligence was rapidly conveyed from Julia as she spoke to Nelly, or that the latter of herself caught up the quizzing spirit of her attack, but the two girls burst out laughing, and George blushed deeply, in shame and irritation.

"First of all," said he, stammering with confusion, "she had a little Arab, the wickedest animal I ever saw. It wasn't safe to approach him; he struck out with his forelegs——"

"Come, Nelly," said Julia, rising, "we'll go into the drawing-room, and leave George to explain how he tamed the Arab and captivated the Arab's mistress, for your brother might like to learn the secret. You'll join us, gentlemen, when you wish for coffee."

"That was scarcely fair, Julia dear," said Nelly, when

they were alone. "Your banter is sometimes too sharp for him."

"I can't help it, dearest — it is a part of my nature. When I was a child, they could not take me to a wild-beast show, for I would insist on poking straws at the tiger—not that poor dear George has much 'tiger' in him. But do you know, Nelly" said she, in a graver tone, "that when people are very poor, when their daily lives are beset by the small accidents of narrow fortune, there is a great philosophy in a little banter? You brush away many an annoyance by seeming to feel it matter for drollery, which, if taken seriously, might have made you fretful and peevish."

"I never suspected there was method in your madness, Ju," said Nelly, smiling.

"Nor was there, dearest; the explanation was almost an afterthought. But come now and tell me about yourselves."

"There is really little to tell. Augustus never speaks to me now of business matters. I think I can see that he is not fully satisfied with himself; but, rather than show weakness or hesitation, he is determined to go on as he began."

"And you are really going to this dreary place?"

"He says so."

"Would any good come, I wonder, of bringing your brother and Pracontal together? They are both men of high and generous feelings. Each seems to think that there ought to be some other settlement than a recourse to lawyers. Do you think he would refuse to meet Pracontal?"

"That is a mere chance. There are days he would not listen to such a proposal, and there are times he would accept it heartily; but the suggestion must not come from me. With all his love for me, he rather thinks that I secretly disapprove of what he has done, and would reverse it if I knew how."

"What if I were to hint at it? He already said he wished to see him. This might be mere curiosity, however. What if I were to say, 'Why not meet Pracontal? Why not see what manner of man he is? There is nothing more true than the saying that half the dislikes people conceive against each other would give way if they would condescend to become acquainted.'"

"As I have just said, it is a mere chance whether he would consent, and then——"

"Oh, I know! It would be also a chance what might come of it."

Just as she said this, the young men entered the room, with smiling faces, and apparently in high good humour.

"Do you know the plan we've just struck out?" cried Bramleigh. "George is to come and live at Cattaro. I'm to make him consular chaplain."

"But is there such an appointment?" asked Julia, eagerly.

"Heaven knows; but if there is not, there ought to be."

"And the salary, Mr. Bramleigh. Who pays it? What is it?"

"There again I am at fault; but Her Majesty could never intend we should live like heathens," said Augustus, "and we shall arrange it somehow."

"Oh, if it were not for 'somehow,'" said Julia, "we poor people would be worse off in life than we are; but there are so many what the watchmakers call escapements in existence, the machinery manages to survive scores of accidents."

"At all events we shall be all together," said Augustus, "and we shall show a stouter front to fortune than if we were to confront her singly."

"I think it a delightful plan," said Julia. "What says Nelly?"

"I think," said Nelly, gravely, "that it is more than kind in you to follow us into our banishment."

"Then let us set off at once," said Augustus, "for I own to you I wish to be out of men's sight, out of ear-shot of their comments, while this suit is going on. It is the publicity that I dread far more than even the issue. Once that we reach this wild barbarism we are going to, you will see I will bear myself with better spirits and better temper."

"And will you not see M. Pracontal before you go?" asked Julia.

"Not if I can avoid it; unless, indeed, you all think I ought."

Julia looked at Nelly, and then at her brother. She looked as if she wanted them to say something—anything; but neither spoke, and then, with a courage that never failed her, she said,—

"Of course we think that a meeting between two people who have no personal reasons for dislike, but have a great question to be decided in favour of one of them, cannot but be useful. If it will not lead to a friendship, it may at least disarm a prejudice."

"I wish I had you for my counsel, Julia," said Bramleigh, smiling. "Is it yet too late to send you a brief?"

"Perhaps I am engaged for the other side."

"At all events," said he, more seriously, "if it be a blunder to meet the man, it cannot much matter. The question between us must be decided elsewhere, and we need not add the prejudices of ignorance to the rancour of self-interest. I'll see him."

"That's right; I'm sure that's right," said L'Estrange. "I'll despatch a note to Lady Augusta, who is eager for your answer."

CHAPTER XLVI.

A STROLL AND A GOSSIP.

As well to have a long talk together as to enjoy the glorious beauty and freshness of the Campagna, the two young men set out the next morning for a walk to Rome. It was one of those still cold days of winter, with a deep blue sky above, and an atmosphere clear as crystal as they started.

There was not in the fortunes of either of them much to cheer the spirits or encourage hope, and yet they felt—they knew not why—a sense of buoyancy and light-heartedness they had not known for many a day back.

"How is it, George," asked Augustus, "can you explain it that when the world went well with me, when I could stroll out into my own woods, and walk for hours over my own broad acres, I never felt so cheery as I do to-day?"

"It was the same spirit made you yesterday declare you enjoyed our humble dinner with a heartier zest than those grand banquets that were daily served up at Castello."

"Just so. But that does not solve the riddle for me. I want to know the why of all this. It is no high sustaining consciousness of doing the right thing; no grand sense of self-approval: for, in the first place, I never had a doubt that we were not the rightful owners of the estate, nor am I now supported by the idea that I am certainly and indubitably on the right road, because nearly all my friends

think the very reverse." L'Estrange made no answer. Bramleigh went on: "You yourself are so minded, George. Out with it, man; say at once you think me wrong."

"I have too little faith in my own judgment to go that far."

"Well, will you say that you would have acted differently yourself? Come, I think you can answer that question."

"No, I cannot."

"You can't say whether you would have done as I have, or something quite different?"

"No; there is only one thing I know I should have done —I'd have consulted Julia."

If Bramleigh laughed at this avowal the other joined him, and for awhile nothing was said on either side. At last, Bramleigh said, "I, too, have a confession to make. I thought that if I were to resist this man's claim by the power of superior wealth I should be acting as dishonourably as though I had fought an unarmed man with a revolver. I told Sedley my scruples, but though he treated them with little deference, there they were, and I could not dismiss them. It was this weakness—Sedley would give it no other name than weakness—of mine that made him incline to settle the matter by a compromise. For a while I yielded to the notion; I'm afraid that I yielded even too far—at least Cutbill opines that one of my letters actually gives a distinct consent, but *I* don't think so. I know that my meaning was to say to my lawyer, 'This man's claim may push me to publicity and much unpleasantness, without any benefit to him. He may make me a nine-days' wonder in the newspapers and a town talk, and never reap the least advantage from it. To avoid such exposure I would pay, and pay handsomely; but if you really opined that I was merely stifling a just demand, such a compromise would only bring me lasting misery.' Perhaps I could not exactly define what I meant; perhaps I expressed myself imperfectly and ill; but Sedley always replied to me by something that seemed to refute my reasonings. At the same time Lord Culduff and Temple treated my scruples with an open contempt. I grew irritable, and possibly less reasonable, and I wrote long letters to Sedley to justify myself and sustain the position I had taken. Of these, indeed of none of my letters, have I copies; and I am told now that they contain admissions which will show that I yielded to the plan of a compromise. Knowing, however, what I felt—

what I still feel on the matter—I will not believe this. At all events the world shall see now that I leave the law to take its course. If Pracontal can establish his right, let him take what he owns. I only bargain for one thing, which is, not to be expelled ignominiously from the house in which I was never the rightful owner. It is the act of abdication, George—the moment of dethronement, that I could not face. It is an avowal of great weakness, I know; but I struggle against it in vain. Every morning when I awoke the same thought met me, am I a mere pretender here? and by some horrible perversity, which I cannot explain, the place, the house, the grounds, the gardens, the shrubberies, the deer-park, grew inexpressibly more dear to me than ever I had felt them. There was not an old ash on the lawn that I did not love; the shady walks through which I had often passed without a thought upon them grew now to have a hold upon and attraction for me that I cannot describe. What shall I be without these dear familiar spots; what will become of me when I shall no longer have these deep glades, these silent woods, to wander in? This became at last so strong upon me that I felt there was but one course to take—I must leave the place at once, and never return to it till I knew that it was my own beyond dispute. I could do that now, while the issue was still undetermined, which would have broken my heart if driven to do on compulsion. Of course this was a matter between me and my own conscience; I had not courage to speak of it to a lawyer, nor did I. Sedley, however, was vexed that I should take any steps without consulting him. He wrote me a letter—almost an angry letter—and he threatened—for it really amounted to a threat, to say that, to a client so decidedly bent on guiding his own case, he certainly felt his services could scarcely be advantageously contributed. I rejoined, perhaps not without irritation; and I am now expecting by each post either his submission to my views, or to hear that he has thrown up the direction of my cause."

"And he was your father's adviser for years!" said L'Estrange, with a tone almost despondent.

"But for which he never would have assumed the tone of dictation he has used towards me. Lord Culduff, I remember, said, 'The first duty of a man on coming to his property is to change his agent, and his next to get rid of the old servants.' I do not like the theory, George; but from a certain point of view it is not without reason."

"I suspect that neither you nor I want to look at life from that point of view," said L'Estrange, with some emotion.

"Not till we can't help, I'm sure; but these crafty men of the world say that we all arrive at their *modus operandi* in the end; that however generously, however trustfully and romantically, we start on the morning of life, before evening we come to see that in this game we call the world it is only the clever player that escapes ruin."

"I don't—that is, I won't believe that."

"Quite right, George. The theory would tell terribly against fellows like us; for, let us do our very best, we must be bunglers at the game. What a clever pair of hacks are those yonder! that grey the lady is on has very showy action."

"Look at the liver chestnut the groom is riding—there's the horse for my money—so long and so low—a regular turnspit, and equal to any weight. I declare, that's Lady Augusta, and that's Pracontal with her. See how the Frenchman charges the ox-fences; he'll come to grief if he rides at speed against timber."

The party on horseback passed in a little dip of the ground near them at a smart canter, and soon were out of sight again.

"What a strange intimacy for her, is it not?"

"Julia says, the dash of indiscretion in it was the temptation she couldn't resist, and I suspect she's right. She said to me herself one day, 'I love skating, but I never care for it except the ice is so thin that I hear it giving way on every side as I go.'"

"She gave you her whole character in that one trait. The pleasure that wasn't linked to a peril had no charm for her. She ought, however, to see that the world will regard this intimacy as a breach of decency."

"So she does; she's dying to be attacked about it; at least, so Julia says."

"The man, too, if he be an artful fellow, will learn many family details about us, that may disserve us. If it went no further than to know in what spirit we treat his claim—whether we attach importance to his pretensions or not—these are all things he need not, should not be informed upon."

"Cutbill, who somehow hears everything, told us t'other morning, that Pracontal is 'posted up'—that was his phrase—as to the temper and nature of every member of your family, and knows to a nicety how to deal with each."

"Then I don't see why we should meet."

"Julia says it is precisely for that very reason; people are always disparaged by these biographical notices, their caprices are assumed to be tastes, and their mere humours are taken for traits of character; and she declares that it will be a good service to the truth that bringing you together. Don't take my version, however, of her reasons, but ask her to give them to you herself."

"Isn't that the wall of the city? I declare we are quite close to Rome already. Now then, first to leave my name for Lady Augusta—not sorry to know I shall not find her at home, for I never understood her, George. I never do understand certain people, whether their levity means that it is the real nature, or simply a humour put on to get rid of you; as though to say, rather than let you impose any solemnity upon me, or talk seriously, I'll have a game at shuttlecock!"

"She always puzzled me," said L'Estrange, "but that wasn't hard to do."

"I suspect, George, that neither you nor I know much about women."

"For *my* part, I know nothing at all about them."

"And I not much."

After this frank confession on either side, they walked along, each seemingly deep in his own thought, and said little till they reached the city. Leaving them, then, on their way to Lady Augusta's house, where Bramleigh desired to drop his card, we turn for a moment to the little villa at Albano, in front of which a smart groom was leading a lady's horse, while in the distance a solitary rider was slowly walking his horse, and frequently turning his looks towards the gate of the villa.

The explanation of all this was, that Lady Augusta had taken the opportunity of being near the L'Estranges to pay a visit to the Bramleighs, leaving Pracontal to wait for her till she came out.

"This visit is for you, Nelly," said Julia, as she read the card; "and I'll make my escape."

She had but time to get out of the room when Lady Augusta entered.

"My dear child," said she, rushing into Nelly's arms, and kissing her with rapturous affection. "My dear child, what a happiness to see you again, and how well you are looking; you're handsomer, I declare, than Marion. Yes, darling—don't blush; it's perfectly true. Where's Augustus? has he come with you?"

"He has gone in to Rome to see you," said Nelly, whose face was still crimson, and who felt flurried and agitated by the flighty impetuosity of the other.

"I hope it was to say that you are both coming to me? Yes, dearest, I'll take no excuse. It would be a town-talk if you stopped anywhere else; and I have such a nice little villa—a mere baby-house; but quite large enough to hold you; and my brother-in-law will take Augustus about, and show him Rome, and I shall have you all to myself. We have much to talk of, haven't we?"

Nelly murmured an assent, and the other continued,—

"It's all so sudden, and so dreadful—one doesn't realize it; at least, *I* don't. And it usually takes me an hour or two of a morning to convince me that we are all ruined; and then I set to work thinking how I'm to live on—I forget exactly what—how much is it, darling? Shall I be able to keep my dear horses? I'd rather die than part with Ben Azir; one of the Sultan's own breeding; an Arab of blue blood, Nelly, think of that! I've refused fabulous sums for him; but he is such a love, and follows me everywhere, and rears up when I scold him—and all to be swept away as if it was a dream. What do you mean to do, dearest? Marry, of course. I know that—but in the meanwhile?"

"We are going to Cattaro. Augustus has been named consul there."

"Darling child, you don't know what you are saying. Isn't a consul a horrid creature that lives in a seaport, and worries merchant seamen, and imprisons people who have no passports?"

"I declare I haven't a notion of his duties," said Nelly, laughing.

"Oh, I know them perfectly. Papa always wrote to the consul about getting heavy baggage through the custom-house; and when our servants quarrelled with the porters, or the hotel people, it was the consul sent some of them to jail; but you are aware, darling, he isn't a creature one knows. They are simply impossible, dear, impossible." And as she spoke she lay back in her chair, and fanned herself as though actually overcome by the violence of her emotion.

"I must hope Augustus will not be impossible;" and Nelly said this with a dry mixture of humour and vexation.

"He can't help it, dearest. It will be from no fault of his own. Let a man be what he may, once he derogates there's

an end of him. It sounds beautifully, I know, to say that he will remain gentleman and man of station through all the accidents of life; so he might, darling, so long as he did nothing—absolutely nothing. The moment, however, he touches an *emploi* it's all over; from that hour he becomes the Customs creature, or the consul, or the factor, or whatever it be, irrevocably. Do you know that is the only way to keep men of family out of small official life? We should see them keeping lighthouses if it were not for the obloquy."

"And it would be still better than dependence."

"Yes, dearest, in a novel—in a three-volume thing from Mudie—so it would; but real life is not half so accommodating. I'll talk to Gusty about this myself. And now, do tell me about yourself. Is there no engagement? no fatal attachment that all this change of fortune has blighted? Who is he, dearest? tell me all! You don't know what a wonderful creature I am for expedients. There never was the like of me for resources. I could always pull any one through a difficulty but myself."

"I am sorry I have no web to offer you for disentanglement."

"So then he has behaved well; he has not deserted you in your change of fortune?"

"There is really no one in the case," said Nelly, laughing. "No one to be either faithful or unworthy."

"Worse again, dearest. There is nothing so good at your age as an unhappy attachment. A girl without a grievance always mopes; and," added she, with a marked acuteness of look, "moping ages one quicker than downright grief. The eyes get a heavy expression, and the mouth drags at the corners, and the chin—isn't it funny, now, such a stolid feature as the chin should take on to worry us?—but the chin widens and becomes square, like those Egyptian horrors in the Museum."

"I must look to that," said Nelly, gravely. "I'd be shocked to find my chin betraying me."

"And men are such wretches. There is no amount of fretting they don't exact from us; but if we show any signs of it afterwards—any hard lines about the eyes, or any patchiness of colour in the cheek—they cry out, 'Isn't she gone off?' That's their phrase. 'Isn't she gone off?'"

"How well you understand; how well you read them!"

"I should think I do; but after all, dearest, they have very few devices: if it wasn't that they can get away, run off to

the clubs and their other haunts, they would have no chance with us. See how they fare in country houses, for instance. How many escape there! What a nice stuff your dress is made of!"

"It was very cheap."

"No matter; it's English. That's the great thing here. Any one can buy a 'gros.' What one really wants is a nameless texture and a neutral tint. You must positively walk with me on the Pincian in that dress. Roman men remark everything. You'll not be ten minutes on the promenade till every one will know whether you wear two buttons on your gloves or three."

"How odious!"

"How delightful! Why, my dear child, for whom do we dress? Not for each other: no more than the artists of a theatre act or sing for the rest of the company. Our audience is before us; not always a very enlightened or cultivated one, but always critical. There, do look at that stupid groom; see how he suffers my horse to lag behind: the certain way to have him kicked by the other; and I should die, I mean really die, if anything happened to Ben Azir. By the way, how well our parson rides. I declare I like him better in the saddle than in the pulpit. They rave here about the way he jumps the ox-fences. You must say *tant des choses* for me, to him and his sister, whom I fear I have treated shamefully. I was to have had her to dinner one day, and I forgot all about it; but she didn't mind, and wrote me the prettiest note in the world. But I always say, it is so easy for people of small means to be good-tempered. They have no jealousies about going here or there; no heart-burnings that such a one's lace is Brussels point, and much finer than their own. Don't you agree with me? There, I knew it would come to that. He's got the snaffle out of Ben Azir's mouth, and he's sure to break away."

"That gentleman apparently has come to the rescue. See, he has dismounted to set all to rights."

"How polite of him. Do you know him, dear?"

"No. I may have seen him before. I'm so terribly short-sighted, and this glass does not suit me; but I must be going. I suppose I had better thank that strange man, hadn't I? Oh, of course, dearest, you would be too bashful; but I'm not. My old governess, Madame de Forgeon, used to say that English people never knew how to be bashful; they only looked culpable. And I protest she was right"

"The gentleman is evidently waiting for your gratitude; he is standing there still."

"What an observant puss it is!" said Lady Augusta, kissing her. "Tell Gusty to come and see me. Settle some day to come in and dine, and bring the parson: he's a great favourite of mine. Where have I dropped my gauntlet? Oh, here it is. Pretty whip, isn't it? A present, a sort of a love-gift from an old Russian prince, who wanted me to marry him: and I said I was afraid; that I heard Russians knouted their wives. And so he assured me I should have the only whip he ever used, and sent me this. It was neat, or rather, as Dumas says, 'La plaisanterie n'était pas mal pour un Cossaque.' Good bye, dearest, good bye."

So actually exhausted was poor Nelly by the rattling impetuosity of Lady Augusta's manner, her sudden transitions, and abrupt questionings, that, when Julia entered the room, and saw her lying back in a chair, wearied looking and pale, she asked,—

"Are you ill, dear?"

"No; but I am actually tired. Lady Augusta has been an hour here, and she has talked till my head turned."

"I feel for you sincerely. She gave me one of the worst headaches I ever had, and then made my illness a reason for staying all the evening here to bathe my temples."

"That was good-natured, however."

"So I'd have thought, too, but that she made George attend her with the ice and the eau-de-cologne, and thus maintained a little ambulant flirtation with him, that, sick as I was, almost drove me mad."

"She means nothing, I am certain, by all these levities, or, rather, she does not care what they mean; but here come our brothers, and I am eager for news, if they have any."

"Where's George?" asked Julia, as Augustus entered alone.

"Sir Marcus something caught him at the gate, and asked to have five minutes with him."

"That means putting off dinner for an hour at least," said she, half pettishly. "I must go and warn the cook."

CHAPTER XLVII.

A PROPOSAL IN FORM.

When Sir Marcus Cluff was introduced into L'Estrange's study, his first care was to divest himself of his various "wraps," a process not very unlike that of the *Hamlet* gravedigger. At length, he arrived at a suit of entire chamois-leather, in which he stood forth like an enormous frog, and sorely pushed the parson's gravity in consequence.

"This is what Hazeldean calls the 'chest-sufferer's true cuticle.' Nothing like leather, my dear sir, in pulmonic affections. If I'd have known it earlier in life, I'd have saved half of my left lung, which is now hopelessly hepatized."

L'Estrange looked compassionate, though not very well knowing what it was he had pity for.

"Not," added the invalid, hastily, "that even this constitutes a grave constitutional defect. Davies says, in his second volume, that among the robust men of England you would not find one in twenty without some lungular derangement. He percussed me all over, and was some time before he found out the blot." The air of triumph in which this was said showed L'Estrange that he too might afford to look joyful.

"So that, with this reservation, sir, I do consider I have a right to regard myself, as Borcas pronounced me, sound as a roach."

"I sincerely hope so."

"You see, sir, I mean to be frank with you. I descend to no concealments."

It was not very easy for L'Estrange to understand this speech, or divine what especial necessity there was for his own satisfaction as to the condition of Sir Marcus Cluff's viscera; he, however, assented in general terms to the high esteem he felt for candour and openness.

"No, my dear Mr. L'Estrange," resumed he, "without this firm conviction—a sentiment based on faith and the stethoscope together—you had not seen me here this day."

"The weather is certainly trying," said L'Estrange.

"I do not allude to the weather, sir; the weather is, for the season, remarkably fine weather; there was a mean temperature of 68° Fahrenheit during the last twenty-four hours. I spoke of my pulmonary condition, because I am aware people are in the habit of calling me consumptive. It is the indiscriminating way ignorance treats a very complex question; and when I assured you that without an honest conviction that organic mischief had not proceeded far, I really meant what I said when I told you you would not have seen me here this day."

Again was the parson mystified, but he only bowed.

"Ah, sir," sighed the other, "why will not people be always candid and sincere? And when shall we arrive at the practice of what will compel—actually compel sincerity? I tell you, for instance, I have an estate worth so much—house property here, and shares in this or that company—but there are mortgages, I don't say how much against me; I have no need to say it. You drive down to the Registration Office and you learn to a shilling to what extent I am liable. Why not have the same system for physical condition, sir? Why can't you call on the College of Physicians, or whatever the body be, and say, 'How is Sir Marcus Cluff? I'd like to know about that right auricle of his heart. What about his pancreas?' Don't you perceive the inestimable advantage of what I advise?"

"I protest, sir, I scarcely follow you. I do not exactly see how I have the right, or to what extent I am interested, to make this inquiry."

"You amaze—you actually amaze me!" and Sir Marcus sat for some seconds contemplating the object of his astonishment. "I come here, sir, to make an offer for your sister's hand——"

"Pardon my interrupting, but I learn this intention only now."

"Then you didn't read my note. You didn't read the 'turn-over.'"

"I'm afraid not. I only saw what referred to the church."

"Then, sir, you missed the most important; had you taken the trouble to turn the page, you would have seen that I ask your permission to pay my formal attentions to Miss L'Estrange. It was with intention I first discussed and dismissed a matter of business; I then proceeded to a question

of sentiment, premising that I held myself bound to satisfy you regarding my property, and my pulmonary condition. Mind, body, and estate, sir, are not coupled together ignorantly, nor inharmoniously; as *you* know far better than me —mind, body, and estate," repeated he slowly. "I am here to satisfy you on each of them."

"Don't you think, Sir Marcus, that there are questions which should possibly precede these?"

"Do you mean Miss L'Estrange's sentiments, sir?" George bowed, and Sir Marcus continued: "I am vain enough to suppose I can make out a good case for myself. I look more, but I'm only forty-eight, forty-eight on the twelfth September. I have twenty-seven thousand pounds in bank stock—stock, mind you—and three thousand four hundred a year in land, Norfolk property. I have a share—we'll not speak of it now—in a city house; and what's better than all, sir, not sixpence of debt in the world. I am aware your sister can have no fortune, but I can afford myself, what the French call a caprice, though this ain't a caprice, for I have thought well over the matter, and I see she would suit me perfectly. She has nice gentle ways, she can be soothing without depression, and calm without discouragement. Ah, that is the secret of secrets! She gave me my drops last evening with a tenderness, a graceful sympathy, that went to my heart. I want that, sir—I need it, I yearn for it. Simpson said to me years ago, 'Marry, Sir Marcus, marry! yours is a temperament that requires study and intelligent care. A really clever woman gets to know a pulse to perfection; they have a finer sensibility, a higher organization, too, in the touch.' Simpson laid great stress on that; but I have looked out in vain, sir. I employed agents: I sent people abroad; I advertised in the *Times*—M. C. was in the second column—for above two years; and with a correspondence that took two clerks to read through and minute. All to no end! All in vain! They tell me that the really competent people never do reply to an advertisement; that one must look out for them oneself, make private personal inquiry. Well, sir, I did that, and I got into some unpleasant scrapes with it, and two actions for breach of promise; two thousand pounds the last cost me, though I got my verdict, sir; the Chief Baron very needlessly recommending me, for the future, to be cautious in forming the acquaintance of ladies, and to avoid widows as a general rule. These are the pleasantries of the Bench, and doubtless they amuse the

junior bar. I declare to you, sir, in all seriousness, I'd rather that a man should give me a fillip on the nose than take the liberty of a joke with me. It is the one insufferable thing in life." This sally had so far excited him that it was some minutes ere he recovered his self-possession. "Now, Mr. L'Estrange," said he, at last, "I bind you in no degree—I pledge you to nothing; I simply ask leave to address myself to your sister. It is what lawyers call a 'motion to show cause why.'"

"I perceive that," broke in L'Estrange; "but even that much I ought not to concede without consulting my sister and obtaining her consent. You will allow me therefore time."

"Time, sir! My nerves must not be agitated. There can be no delays. It was not without a great demand on my courage, and a strong dose of chlorodine—Japps's preparation—that I made this effort now. Don't imagine I can sustain it much longer. No, sir, I cannot give time."

"After all, Sir Marcus, you can scarcely suppose that my sister is prepared for such a proposition."

"Sir, they are always prepared for it. It never takes them unawares. I have made them my study for years, and I do think I have some knowledge of their way of thinking and acting. I'll lay my life on it, if you will go and say, 'Maria'——"

"My sister's name is Julia," said the other, dryly.

"It may be, sir—I said 'Maria' generically, and I repeat it—'Maria, there is in my study at this moment a gentleman, of irreproachable morals and unblemished constitution, whose fortune is sufficiently ample to secure many comforts and all absolute necessaries, who desires to make you his wife;' her first exclamation will be, 'It is Sir Marcus Cluff.'"

"It is not impossible," said L'Estrange, gravely.

"The rest, sir, is not with you, nor even with me. Do me, then, the great favour to bear my message."

Although seeing the absurdity of the situation, and vaguely forecasting the way Julia might possibly hear the proposition, L'Estrange was always so much disposed to yield to the earnestness of any one who persisted in a demand, that he bowed and left the room.

"Well, George, he has proposed?" cried Julia, as her brother entered the room, where she sat with Nelly Bramleigh.

He nodded only, and the two girls burst out into a merry laugh.

"Come, come, Julia," said he, reprovingly. "Absurd as it may seem, the man is in earnest, and must be treated with consideration."

"But tell us the whole scene. Let us have it all as it occurred."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. It's quite enough to say that he declares he has a good fortune, and wishes to share it with you, and I think the expression of that wish should secure him a certain deference and respect."

"But who refuses, who thinks of refusing him all the deference and respect he could ask for? Not I certainly. Come now, like a dear good boy, let us hear all he said, and what you replied. I suspect there never was a better bit of real-life comedy. I only wish I could have had a part in it."

"Not too late yet, perhaps," said Nelly, with a dry humour. "The fifth act is only beginning."

"That is precisely what I am meditating. George will not tell me accurately what took place in his interview, and I think I could not do better than go and learn Sir Marcus' sentiments for myself."

She arose and appeared about to leave the room when L'Estrange sprang towards the door, and stood with his back against it.

"You're not serious, Ju?" cried he, in amazement.

"I should say very serious. If Sir Marcus only makes out his case, as favourably as you, with all your bungling, can't help representing it, why—all things considered, eh, Nelly? *you*, I know, agree with me—I rather suspect the proposition might be entertained."

"Oh, this is too monstrous. It is beyond all belief," cried L'Estrange.

And he rushed from the room in a torrent of passion, while Julia sank back in a chair, and laughed till her eyes ran over with tears of merriment.

"How could you, Julia! Oh, how could you!" said Nelly, as she leaned over her and tried to look reproachful.

"If you mean, how could I help quizzing him? I can understand you; but I could not—no, Nelly, I could not help it! It is my habit to seize on the absurd side of any embarrassment; and you may be sure there is always one if you only look for it; and you've no idea how much pleasanter—ay, and easier too—it is to laugh oneself out of difficulties than to grieve over them. You'll see George,

now, will be spirited up, out of pure fright, to do what he ought; to tell this man that his proposal is an absurdity, and that young women, even as destitute of fortune as myself, do not marry as nursetenders. There! I declare that is Sir Marcus driving away already. Only think with what equanimity I can see wealth and title taking leave of me. Never say after that that I have not courage."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

"A TELEGRAM."

"THIS is a very eventful day for me, George," said Augustus, as they strolled through the garden after breakfast. "The trial was fixed for the 13th, and to-day is the 14th; I suppose the verdict will be given to-day."

"But you have really no doubt of the result? I mean, no more than anxiety on so momentous a matter must suggest?"

"Pardon me. I have grave doubts. There was such a marriage, as is alleged, formed by my grandfather; a marriage in every respect legal. They may not have the same means of proving that which we have; but we know it. There was a son born to that marriage. We have the letter of old Lami, asking my grandfather to come over to Bruges for the christening, and we have the receipt of Hodges and Smart, the jewellers, for a silver gilt ewer and cup which were engraved with the Bramleigh crest and cypher, and despatched to Belgium as a present; for my grandfather did not go himself, pretexting something or other, which evidently gave offence; for Lami's next letter declares that the present has been returned, and expresses a haughty indignation at my grandfather's conduct. I can vouch for all this. It was a sad morning when I first saw those papers; but I did see them, George, and they exist still. That son of my grandfather's they declare to have married, and his son is this Pracontal. There is the whole story, and if the latter part of the narrative be only as truthful as I believe the first to be, he, and not I, is the rightful owner of Castello."

L'Estrange made no reply; he was slowly going over in his mind the chain of connection, and examining, link by link, how it held together.

"But why," asked he at length, "was not this claim preferred before? Why did a whole generation suffer it to lie dormant?"

"That is easily—too easily explained. Lami was compromised in almost every country in Europe; and his son succeeded him in his love of plot and conspiracy. Letters occasionally reached my father from this latter; some of them demanding money in a tone of actual menace. A confidential clerk, who knew all my father's secrets, and whom he trusted most implicitly, became one day a defaulter and absconded, carrying with him a quantity of private papers, some of which were letters written by my father, and containing remittances which Montagu Lami—or Louis Langrange, or whatever other name he bore—of course, never received, and indignantly declared he believed had never been despatched. This clerk, whose name was Hesketh, made Lami's acquaintance in South America, and evidently encouraged him to prefer his claim with greater assurance, and led him to suppose that any terms he preferred must certainly be complied with! But I cannot go on, George; the thought of my poor father struggling through life in this dark conflict rises up before me, and now I estimate the terrible alternation of hope and fear in which he must have lived, and how despairingly he must have thought of a future, when this deep game should be left to such weak hands as mine. I thought they were cruel words once in which he spoke of my unfitness to meet a great emergency—but now I read them very differently."

"Then do you really think he regarded this claim as rightful and just?"

"I cannot tell that; at moments I have leaned to this impression; but many things dispose me to believe that he saw or suspected some flaw that invalidated the claim, but still induced him to silence the pretension by hush money."

"And you yourself——"

"Don't ask me, my dear friend; do not ask me the question I see is on your lips. I have no courage to confess, even to you, through how many moods I pass every day I live. At moments I hope and firmly believe I rise above every low and interested sentiment, and determine I will do as I would

be done by; I will go through this trial as though it were a matter apart from me, and in which truth and justice were my only objects. There are hours in which I feel equal to any sacrifice, and could say to this man:—'There! take it; take all we have in the world. We have no right to be here; we are beggars and outcasts. And then—I can't tell how or why—it actually seems as if there was a real Tempter in one's nature, lying in wait for the moment of doubt and hesitation; but suddenly, quick as a flash of lightning, a thought would dart across my mind, and I would begin to canvass this and question that; not fairly, not honestly, mark you, but casuistically and cunningly; and worse, far worse than all this—actually hoping, no matter on which side lay the right, that *we* should come out victorious."

"But have you not prejudiced your case by precipitancy? They tell me that you have given the others immense advantage by your openly declared doubts as to your title."

"That is possible. I will not deny that I may have acted imprudently. The compromise to which I at first agreed struck me, on reflection, as so ignoble and dishonourable, that I rushed just as rashly into the opposite extreme. I felt, in fact, George, as though I owed this man a reparation for having ever thought of stifling his claim; and I carried this sentiment so far that Sedley asked me one day, in a scornful tone, what ill my family had done me I was so bent on ruining them? Oh, my dear friend, if it be a great relief to me to open my heart to you, it is with shame I confess that I cannot tell you truthfully how weak and unable I often feel to keep straight in the path I have assigned myself. How, when some doubt of this man's right shoots across me, I hail the hesitation like a blessing from heaven. What I would do; what I would endure that he could not show his claim to be true, I dare not own. I have tried to reverse our positions in my own mind, and imagine I was he; but I cannot pursue the thought, for whenever the dread final rises before me, and I picture to myself our ruin and destitution, I can but think of him, as a deadly implacable enemy. This sacrifice, then, that I purpose to make with a pure spirit and a high honour, is too much for me. I have not courage for that I am doing; but I'll do it still!"

L'Estrange did his utmost to rally him out of his depression, assuring him that, as the world went, few men would have attempted to do what he had determined on, and frankly owning, that in talking over the matter with Julia, they

were both disposed to regard his conduct as verging on Quixotism.

"And that is exactly the best thing people will say of it. I am lucky if they will even speak so favourably."

"What's this—a telegram?" cried L'Estrange, as the servant handed him one of those squared-shaped missives, so charged with destiny that one really does not know whether to bless or curse the invention, which, annihilating space, brings us so quickly face to face with fortune.

"Read it, George; I cannot," muttered Bramleigh, as he stood against a tree for support.

"Ten o'clock. Court-house, Navan. Jury just come out —cannot agree to verdict—discharged. New trial. I write post.

"SEDLEY."

"Thank heaven, there is at least a respite," said Bramleigh; and he fell on the other's shoulder, and hid his face.

"Bear up, my poor fellow. You see that, at all events, nothing has happened up to this. Here are the girls coming. Let them not see you in such emotion."

"Come away, then; come away. I can't meet them now; or do you go and tell Nelly what this news is—she has seen the messenger, I'm sure."

L'Estrange met Nelly and Julia in the walk, while Augustus hastened away in another direction. "There has been no verdict. Sedley sends his message from the court-house this morning, and says the jury cannot agree, and there will be another trial."

"Is that bad or good news?" asked Nelly, eagerly.

"I'd say good," replied he; "at least, when I compare it with your brother's desponding tone this morning. I never saw him so low."

"Oh, he is almost always so of late. The coming here and the pleasure of meeting you rallied him for a moment, but I foresaw his depression would return. I believe it is the uncertainty, the never-ceasing terror of what next, is breaking him down; and if the blow fell at once, you would see him behave courageously and nobly."

"He ought to get away from this as soon as possible," said L'Estrange. "He met several acquaintances yesterday in Rome, and they teased him to come to them, and worried him to tell where he was stopping. In his present humour

he could not go into society, but he is ashamed to his own heart to admit it."

"Then why don't we go at once?" cried Julia.

"There's nothing to detain us here," said L'Estrange, sorrowfully.

"Unless you mean to wait for my marriage," said Julia, laughing, "though, possibly, Sir Marcus may not give me another chance."

"Oh, Julia!"

"Oh, Julia! Well, dearest, I do say shocking things, there's no doubt of it; but when I've said them, I feel the subject off my conscience, and revert to it no more."

"At all events," said L'Estrange, after a moment of thought, "let us behave when we meet him as though this news was not bad. I know he will try to read in our faces what we think of it, and on every account it is better not to let him sink into depression."

The day passed over in that discomfort which a false position so inevitably imposes. The apparent calm was a torture, and the efforts at gaiety were but moments of actual pain. The sense of something impending was so poignant that at every stir—the opening of a door or the sound of a bell—there came over each a look of anxiety the most intense and eager. All their attempts at conversation were attended with a fear lest some unhappy expression, some ill-timed allusion might suggest the very thought they were struggling to suppress; and it was with a feeling of relief they parted and said good-night, where, at other times, there had been only regret at separating.

Day after day passed in the same forced and false tranquillity, the preparations for the approaching journey being the only relief to the intense anxiety that weighed like a load on each. At length, on the fifth morning, there came a letter to Augustus in the well-known hand of Sedley, and he hastened to his room to read it. Some sharp passages there had been between them of late on the subject of the compromise, and Bramleigh, in a moment of forgetfulness and anger, even went so far as to threaten that he would have recourse to the law to determine whether his agent had or had not overstepped the bounds of his authority, and engaged in arrangements at total variance to all his wishes and instructions. A calm but somewhat indignant reply from Sedley, however, recalled Bramleigh to reconsider his words, and even ask pardon for them, and since that day their intercourse had been more

cordial and frank than ever. The present letter was very long, and quite plainly written, with a strong sense of the nature of him it was addressed to. For Sedley well knew the temper of the man—his moods of high resolve and his moments of discouragement—his desire to be equal to a great effort, and his terrible consciousness that his courage could not be relied on. The letter began thus:—

"My dear Sir,—

"If I cannot, as I hoped, announce a victory, I am able at least to say that we have not been defeated. The case was fairly and dispassionately stated, and probably an issue of like importance was never discussed with less of acrimony, or less of that captious and overreaching spirit which is too common in legal contests. This was so remarkable as to induce the judge to comment on it in his charge, and declare that in all his experience on the bench, he had never before witnessed anything so gratifying or so creditable alike to plaintiff and defendant.

"Lawson led for the other side, and, I will own, made one of the best openings I ever listened to, disclaiming at once any wish to appeal to sympathies or excite feeling of pity for misfortunes carried on through three generations of blameless sufferers; he simply directed the jury to follow him in the details of a brief and not very complicated story, every step of which he would confirm and establish by evidence.

"The studious simplicity of his narrative was immense art, and though he carefully avoided even a word that could be called high-flown, he made the story of Montagu Bramleigh's courtship of the beautiful Italian girl one of the most touching episodes I ever listened to.

"The marriage was, of course, the foundation of the whole claim, and he arrayed all his proofs of it with great skill. The recognition in your grandfather's letters, and the tone of affection in which they were written, his continual reference to her in his life, left little if any doubt on the minds of the jury, even though there was nothing formal or official to show that the ceremony of marriage had passed; he reminded the jury that the defence would rely greatly on this fact, but the fact of a missing registry-book was neither so new nor so rare in this country as to create any astonishment, and when he offered proof that the church and the vestry-room had been sacked by the rebels in '98, the evidence seemed almost super-

fluous. The birth and baptism of the child he established thoroughly; and here he stood on strong grounds, for the infant was christened at Brussels by the Protestant chaplain of the Legation at the Hague, and he produced a copy of the act of registry, stating the child to be son of Montagu Bramleigh, of Cossenden Manor, and Grosvenor Square, London, and of Enrichetta his wife. Indeed, as Lawson declared, if these unhappy foreigners had ever even a glimmering suspicion that the just rights of this poor child were to be assailed and his inheritance denied him, they could not have taken more careful and cautious steps to secure his succession than the simple but excellent precautions they had adopted.

"The indignation of Lami at what he deemed the unfeeling and heartless conduct of Montagu Bramleigh—his cold reception of the news of his son's birth, and the careless tone in which he excused himself from going over to the christening—rose to such a pitch that he swore the boy should never bear his father's name, nor ever in any way be beholden to him, and 'this rash oath it was that has carried misery down to another generation, and involved in misfortune others not more blameless nor more truly to be pitied than he who now seeks redress at your hands.' This was the last sentence he uttered after speaking three hours, and obtaining a slight pause to recruit his strength.

"Issue of Montagu Bramleigh being proved, issue of that issue was also established, and your father's letters were given in evidence to show how he had treated with these claimants and given largely in money to suppress or silence their demands. Thos. Bolton, of the house of Parker and Bolton, bankers, Naples, proved the receipt of various sums from Montagu Bramleigh in favour of A. B. C., for so the claimant was designated, private confidential letters to Bolton showing that these initials were used to indicate one who went under many aliases, and needed every precaution to escape the police. Bolton proved the journal of Giacomo Lami, which he had often had in his own possession. In fact this witness damaged us more than all the rest; his station and position in life, and the mode in which he behaved under examination, having great effect on the jury, and affording Lawson a favourable opportunity of showing what confidence was felt in the claimant's pretensions by a man of wealth and character, even when the complications of political conspiracy had served to exhibit him as a dangerous adventurer.

"Waller's reply was able, but not equal to his best efforts. It is but fair to him, however, to state that he complained of our instructions, and declared that your determination not to urge anything on a point of law, nor tender opposition on grounds merely techinal, left him almost powerless in the case. He devoted his attention almost entirely to disprove the first marriage, that of Mr. B. with Enrichetta Lami; he declared that, the relative rank of the parties considered, the situation in which they were placed towards each other, and all the probabilities of the case duly weighed, there was every reason to believe the connection was illicit. This view was greatly strengthened by Mr. B.'s subsequent conduct; his refusal to go over to the christening, and the utter indifference he displayed to the almost menacing tone of old Lami's letters; and when he indignantly asked the jury 'if a man were likely to treat in this manner his wife and the mother of his first-born, the heir to his vast fortune and estates,' there was a subdued murmur in the court that showed how strongly this point had told.

"He argued that when a case broke down at its very outset, it would be a mere trifling with the time of the court to go further to disprove circumstances based on a fallacy. As to the christening and the registration of baptism, what easier than for a woman to declare whatever she pleased as to the paternity of her child? It was true he was written son of Montagu Bramleigh: but when we once agree that there was no marriage, this declaration has no value. He barely touched on the correspondence and the transmission of money abroad, which he explained as the natural effort of a man of high station and character to suppress the notoriety of a youthful indiscretion. Political animosity had, at that period, taken a most injurious turn, and scandal was ransacked to afford means of attack on the reputations of public men.

"I barely give you the outline of his argument, but I will send you the printed account of the trial as soon as the shorthand writer shall have completed it for press. Baron Jocelyn's charge was, I must say, less in our favour than I had expected; and when he told the jury that the expressions of attachment and affection in Mr. B.'s letters, and the reiterated use of the phrase 'my dear, dear wife,' demanded their serious consideration as to whether such words would have fallen from a man hampered by an illicit connection, and already speculating how to be free of it; all this, put with

great force and clearness, and a certain appeal to their sense of humanity, did us much disservice. The length of time he dwelt on this part of the case was so remarkable, that I overheard a Q.C. say he had not known till then that his lordship was retained for the plaintiff.

"When he came to that part where allusion was made to the fact of the claimant being a foreigner, he made an eloquent and effective appeal to the character of English justice, which elicited a burst of applause in the court that took some seconds to repress; but this, I um told, was more owing to the popular sympathy with the politics of old Lami, and his connection with the rebellion of '98, than with any enthusiasm for his lordship's oratory.

"The jury were three hours in deliberation. I am confidentially informed that we had but five with, and seven against us; the verdict, as you know, was not agreed on. We shall go to trial in spring, I hope with Holmes to lead for us, for I am fully persuaded the flaw lies in the history subsequent to the marriage of Mr. B., and that it was a mistake to let the issue turn on the event which had already enlisted the sympathies of the jury in its favour.

"In conclusion, I ought to say, that the plaintiff's friends regard the result as a victory, and the national press is strong in asserting that, if the Orange element had been eliminated from the jury-box, there is little doubt that Count Bramleigh—as they call him—would at that hour be dispensing the splendid hospitalities of a princely house to his county neighbours, and the still more gratifying benefits of a wide charity to the poor around him. Writing rapidly, as I do, I make no pretension to anything like an accurate history of the case. There are a vast variety of things to which I mean to direct your attention when a more favourable moment will permit. I will only now add, that your presence in England is urgently required, and that your return to Castello, to resume there the style of living that alike becomes the proprietor and the place, is, in the opinion of all your friends, much to be desired.

"Mr. Waller does not hesitate to say that your absence decided the case against you, and was heard to declare openly that 'he for one had no fancy to defend a cause for a man who voluntarily gave himself up as beaten.'

"May I entreat, then, you will make it your convenience to return here? I cannot exaggerate the ill effects of your absence, nor to what extent your enemies are enabled to use

the circumstance to your discredit. Jurors are, after all but men, taken from the common mass of those who read and talk over the public scandals of the hour, and all the cautions of the Bench never yet succeeded in making men forget, within the court-house, what they had for weeks before been discussing outside of it.

"At all events, do not dismiss my suggestion without some thought over it, or better still, without consulting some friends in whose sense and intelligence you have confidence. I am, with many apologies for the liberty I have thus taken,

"Most faithfully, your servant,

"T. SEDLEY."

When Bramleigh had read this letter carefully over, he proceeded to Nelly's room, to let her hear its contents.

"It's not very cheery news," said he, "but it might be worse. Shall I read it for you, or will you read it yourself?"

"Read it, Gusty; I would rather hear it from you," said she, as she sat down with her face to the window, and partially averted from him as he sat.

Not a word dropped from her while he read, and though once or twice he paused as if to invite a remark or a question, she never spoke, nor by a look or a gesture denoted how the tidings affected her.

"Well," asked he at last, "what do you say to it all?"

"It's worse—I mean worse for us—than I had ever suspected! Surely, Gusty, *you* had no conception that their case had such apparent strength and solidity?"

"I have thought so for many a day," said he, gloomily.

"Thought that they, and not we——" she could not go on.

"Just so, dearest," said he, drawing his chair to her side, and laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder.

"And do you believe that poor papa thought so?" said she, and her eyes now swam in tears.

A scarcely perceptible nod was all his answer.

"Oh, Gusty, this is more misery than I was prepared for!" cried she, throwing herself on his shoulder. "To think that all the time we were—what many called—outraging the world with display; exhibiting our wealth in every ostentatious way; to think that it was not ours, that we were mere pretenders, with a mock rank, a mock station."

"My father did not go thus far, Nelly," said he, gravely. "That he did not despise these pretensions I firmly believe, but that they ever gave him serious reason to suppose his right could be successfully disputed, this I do not believe. His fear was, that when the claim came to be resisted by one like myself, the battle would be ill fought. It was in this spirit he said, 'Would that Marion had been a boy!'"

"And what will you do, Gusty?"

"I'll tell you what I will not do, Nelly," said he, firmly: "I will not, as this letter counsels me, go back to live where it is possible I have no right to live, nor spend money to which the law may to-morrow declare I have no claim. I will abide by what that law shall declare, without one effort to bias it in my favour. I have a higher pride in submitting myself to this trial than ever I had in being the owner of Castello. It may be that I shall not prove equal to what I propose to myself. I have no over-confidence in my own strength, but I like to think, that if I come well through the ordeal, I shall have done what will dignify a life, humble even as mine, and give me a self-respect without which existence is valueless to me. Will you stand by me, Nelly, in this struggle—I shall need you much?"

"To the last," said she, giving him both her hands, which he grasped within his, and pressed affectionately.

"Write, then, one line from me to Sedley, to say that I entrust the case entirely to his guidance; that I will not mix myself with it in any way, nor will I return to England till it be decided; and say, if you can, that you agree with me in this determination. And then, if the L'Estranges are ready, let us start at once."

"They only wait for us; Julia said so this morning."

"Then we shall set out to-morrow."

CHAPTER XLIX.

A LONG TETE-A-TETE.

"SCANT courtesy, I must say," exclaimed Lady Augusta, as, after rapidly running her eyes over a note, she flung it across the table towards Pracontal.

They were seated tête-à-tête in that small drawing-room which looked out upon the garden and the grounds of the Borghese Palace.

"Am I to read it?" asked he.

"Yes, if you like. It is from Augustus Bramleigh, a person you feel some interest in."

Pracontal took up the note, and seemed to go very carefully over its contents.

"So then," said he, as he finished, "he thinks it better not to meet—not to know me."

"Which is no reason on earth for being wanting in a proper attention to *me*," said she, angrily. "To leave Rome without calling here, without consulting my wishes, and learning my intentions for the future, is a gross forgetfulness of proper respect."

"I take it, the news of the trial was too much for him. Longworth said it would, and that the comments of the press would be insupportable besides."

"But what have *I* to do with that, sir? Mr. Bramleigh's first duty was to come here. *I* should have been thought of. *I* was the first person this family should have remembered in their hour of difficulty."

"There was no intentional want of respect in it, I'll be bound," cried Pracontal. "It was just a bashful man's dread of an awkward moment—that English terror of what you call a 'scene'—that sent him off."

"It is generous of you, sir, to become his apologist. I only wonder——" here she stopped and seemed confused.

"Go on, my lady. Pray finish what you began."

"No, sir. It is as well unsaid."

"But it was understood, my lady, just as well as if it had been uttered. Your ladyship wondered who was to apologize for *me*."

She grew crimson as he spoke; but a faint smile seemed to say how thoroughly she relished that southern keenness that could divine a half-uttered thought.

"How quick you are!" said she, without a trace of irritation.

"Say, rather, how quick he ought to be who attempts to parry *you* at fence. And, after all," said he, in a lighter tone, "is it not as well that he has spared us all an embarrassment? *I* could not surely have been able to condole with *him*, and how could he have congratulated *me?*"

"Pardon, me, Count, but the matter, so far as I learn, is precisely as it was before. There is neither subject for condolence nor gratulation."

"So far as the verdict of the jury went, my lady, you are quite right; but what do you say to that larger, wider verdict pronounced by the press, and repeated in a thousand forms by the public? May I read you one passage, only one, from my lawyer Mr. Kelson's letter?"

"Is it short?"

"Very short."

"And intelligible?"

"Most intelligible."

"Read it then."

"Here it is," said he, opening a letter, and turning to the last page. "'Were I to sum up what is the popular opinion of the result, I could not do it better than repeat what a City capitalist said to me this morning, "I'd rather lend Count Pracontal twenty thousand pounds to-day, than take Mr. Bramleigh's mortgage for ten."'"

"Let me read that. I shall comprehend his meaning better than by hearing it. This means evidently," said she, after reading the passage, "that your chances are better than his."

"Kelson tells me success is certain."

"And your cautious friend, Mr. —; I always forget that man's name?"

"Longworth?"

"Yes, Longworth. What does he say?"

"He is already in treaty with me to let him have a small farm which adjoins his grounds, and which he would like to throw into his lawn."

"Seriously?"

"No, not a bit seriously; but we pass the whole morning building these sort of castles in Spain, and the grave way

that he entertains such projects ends by making me believe I am actually the owner of Castello and all its belongings."

"Tell me some of your plans," said she, with a livelier interest than she had yet shown.

"First of all, reconciliation, if that be its proper name, with all that calls itself Bramleigh. I don't want to be deemed a usurper but a legitimate monarch. It is to be a restoration."

"Then you ought to marry Nelly. I declare that never struck me before."

"Nor has it yet occurred to me, my lady," said he, with a faint show of irritation.

"And why not, sir? Is it that you look higher?"

"I look higher," said he; and there was a solemn intensity in his air and manner as he spoke.

"I declare, Monsieur de Pracontal, it is scarcely delicate to say this to *me*."

"Your ladyship insists on my being candid, even at the hazard of my courtesy."

"I do not complain of your candour, sir. It is your—your——"

"My pretension?"

"Well, yes, pretension will do."

"Well, my lady, I will not quarrel with the phrase. I do 'pretend,' as we say in French. In fact, I have been little other than a pretender these last few years."

"And what is it you pretend to? May I ask the question?"

"I do not know if I may dare to answer it," said he slowly. . . ."I will explain what I mean," added he, after a brief silence, and drawing his chair somewhat nearer to where she sat. "I will explain. If, in one of my imaginative gossipries with a friend, I were to put forward some claim—some ambition—which would sound absurd coming from me *now*, but which, were I the owner of a great estate, would neither be extravagant nor ridiculous, the memory of that unlucky pretension would live against me ever after, and the laugh that my vanity excited would ring in my ears long after I had ceased to regard the sentiment as vanity at all. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, I believe I do. I would only have you remember that I am not Mr. Longworth."

"A reason the more for my caution."

"Couldn't we converse without riddles, Count Pracontal?"

"I protest I should like to do so."

"And as I make no objection——"

"Then to begin. You asked me what I should do if I were to gain my suit; and my answer is, if I were not morally certain to gain it, I'd never exhibit myself in the absurd position of planning a life I was never to arrive at."

"You are too much a Frenchman for that."

"Precisely, madame. I am too much a Frenchman for that. The exquisite sensibility to ridicule puts a very fine edge on national character, though your countrymen will not admit it."

"It makes very tetchy acquaintances," said she, with a malicious laugh.

"And develops charming generosity in those who forgive us!"

"I cry off. I can't keep up this game of give and take flatteries. Let us come back to what we were talking of, that is, if either of us can remember it. O yes, I know it now. You were going to tell me the splendid establishment you'd keep at Castello. I'm sure the cook will leave nothing to desire—but how about the stable? That 'steppere' will not exactly be in his place in an Irish county."

"Madame, you forget I was a lieutenant of hussars."

"My dear Count, that does not mean riding."

"Madame!"

"I should now rise and say 'Monsieur!' and it would be very good comedy after the French pattern; but I prefer the sofa and my ease, and will simply beg you to remember the contract we made the other day—that each was to be at liberty to say any impertinence to the other, without offence being taken."

Pracontal laid his hand on his heart, and bowed low and deep.

"There are some half a dozen people in that garden yonder, who have passed and repassed—I can't tell how many times—just to observe us. You'll see them again in a few minutes, and we shall be town-talk to-morrow, I'm certain. There are no tête-à-têtes ever permitted in Rome if a cardinal or a monsignore be not one of the performers."

"Are those they?" cried he, suddenly.

"Yes, and there's not the least occasion for that flash of the eye and that hot glow of indignation on the cheek. I assure you, monsieur, there is nobody there to *couper la gorge* with you, or share in any of those social pleasantries

which make the 'Bois' famous. The curiously-minded individual is a lady—a Mrs. Trumpler—and her attendants are a few freshly arrived curates. There, now, sit down again and look less like a wounded tiger, for all this sort of thing fusses and fevers me. Yes, you may fan me, though if the detectives return it will make the report more highly coloured."

Pracontal was now seated on a low stool beside her sofa and fanning her assiduously.

"Not but these people are all right," continued she. "It is quite wrong in me to admit you to my intimacy—wrong to admit you at all. My sister is so angry about it, she won't come here—fact, I assure you. Now don't look so delighted and so triumphant, and the rest of it. As your nice little phrase has it, you 'are for nothing' in the matter at all. It is all myself, my own whim, my fancy, my caprice. *I* saw that the step was just as unadvisable as they said it was. I saw that any commonly discreet person would not have even made your acquaintance, standing as I did; but unfortunately for me, like poor Eve, the only tree whose fruit I covet is the one I'm told isn't good for me. There go our friends once more. I wish I could tell her who you are, and not keep her in this state of torturing anxiety."

"Might I ask, my lady," said he, gravely, "if you have heard anything to my discredit or disparagement, as a reason for the severe sentence you have just spoken?"

"No, unfortunately not, for in that case my relatives would have forgiven me. They know the wonderful infatuation that attracts me to damaged reputations, and as they have not yet found out any considerable flaw in yours, they are puzzled, out of all measure, to know what it is I see in you."

"I am overwhelmed by your flattery, madam," said he, trying to seem amused, but, in spite of himself, showing some irritation.

"Not that," resumed she, in that quiet manner which showed that her mind had gone off suddenly in another direction, "not that I owe much deference to the Bramleighs, who, one and all, have treated me with little courtesy. Marion behaved shamefully—that, of course, was to be expected. To marry that odious old creature for a position, implied how she would abuse the position when she got it. As I said to Gusty, when a young Oxford man gives five guineas for a mount, he doesn't think he has the worth of

his money if he doesn't smash his collar-bone. There, put down that fan, you are making me feverish. Then the absurdity of playing *peeress* to *me!* How ashamed the poor old man was; he reddened through all his rouge. Do you know," added she, in an excited manner, "that she had the impertinence to compare her marriage with mine, and say, that at least rank and title were somewhat nobler ambitions than a mere subsistence and a settlement. But I answered her. I told her, 'You have forgotten one material circumstance. I did not live with your father!' O yes! we exchanged a number of little courtesies of this kind, and I was so sorry when I heard she had gone to Naples. I was only getting into stride when the race was over. As to my settlement, I have not the very vaguest notion who'll pay it; perhaps it may be *you*. Oh, of course I know the unutterable bliss, but you must really ask your lawyer, how is my lien to be disposed of. Some one said to me the other day that, besides the estate, you would have a claim for about eighty thousand pounds."

"It was Longworth said so."

"I don't like your friend Longworth. Is he a gentleman?"

"Most unquestionably."

"Well, but I mean a born gentleman? I detest and I distrust your nature-made gentlemen, who, having money enough to 'get up' the part, deem that quite sufficient. I want the people whose families have given guarantees for character during some generations. Six o'clock! only think, you are here three mortal hours! I declare, sir, this must not occur again; and I have to dress now. I dine at the Prince Cornarini's. Do you go there?"

"I go nowhere, my lady. I know no one."

"Well, I can't present you. It would be too compromising. And yet they want men like you very much here. The Romans are so dull and stately, and the English who frequent the best houses are so dreary. There, go away now. You want leave to come to-morrow, but I'll not grant it. I must hear what Mrs. Trumpler says before I admit you again."

"When then may I——"

"I don't know; I have not thought of it. Let it be—let it be when you have gained your lawsuit," cried she, in a burst of laughter, and hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER L.

CATTARO.

If Cattaro was more picturesque and strange-looking than the Bramleighs had expected, it was also far more poverty-stricken and desolate. The little town, escarped out of a lofty mountain, with the sea in front, consisted of little more than one straggling street, which followed every bend and indentation of the shore. It is true, wherever a little plateau offered on the mountain, a house was built; and to these small winding paths led up, through rocks bristling with the cactus, or shaded by oleanders large as olive-trees. Beautiful little bits of old Venetian architecture, in balconies or porticoes, peeped out here and there through the dark foliage of oranges and figs; and richly ornamented gates, whose arabesques yet glistened with tarnished gilding, were festooned with many a flowery creeper, and that small banksia-rose, so tasteful in its luxuriance. From the sea it would be impossible to imagine anything more beautiful or more romantic. As you landed, however, the illusion faded, and dirt, misery, and want stared at you at every step. Decay and ruin were on all sides. Palaces, whose marble mouldings and architraves were in the richest style of Byzantine art, were propped up by rude beams of timber that obstructed the footway, while from their windows and balconies hung rags and tattered draperies, the signs of a poverty within great as the ruin without. The streets were lined with a famished, half-clothed population, sitting idly or sleeping. A few here and there affected to be vendors of fruit and vegetables, but the mass were simply loungers reduced to the miserable condition of an apathy which saw nothing better to be done with life than dream it away. While Bramleigh and L'Estrange were full of horror at the wretchedness of the place, their sisters were almost wild with delight at its barbaric beauty, its grand savagery, and its brilliantly picturesque character. The little inn, which probably for years had dispensed no other hospitalities than those of the café, that extended from the darkly columned portico to half across the piazza, certainly contributed slightly

to allay the grumblings of the travellers. The poorly furnished rooms were ill kept and dirty, the servants lazy, and the fare itself the very humblest imaginable.

Nothing short of the unfailing good temper and good spirits of Julia and Nelly could have rallied the men out of their sulky discontent; that spirit to make the best of everything, to catch at every passing gleam of sunlight on the landscape, and even in moments of discouragement to rally at the first chance of what may cheer and gladden—this is womanly, essentially womanly. It belongs not to the man's nature; and even if he should have it, he has it in a less discriminative shape and in a coarser fashion.

While Augustus and L'Estrange then sat sulkily smoking their cigars on the sea-wall, contemptuously turning their backs on the mountain variegated with every hue of foliage, and broken in every picturesque form, the girls had found out a beautiful old villa, almost buried in orange-trees in a small cleft of the mountain, through which a small cascade descended and fed a fountain that played in the hall; the perfect stillness, only broken by the splash of the falling water, and the sense of delicious freshness imparted by the crystal circles eddying across the marble fount, so delighted them that they were in ecstasies when they found that the place was to be let, and might be their own for a sum less than a very modest "entresol" would cost in a cognate city.

"Just imagine, Gusty, he will let it to us for three hundred florins a year; and for eighteen hundred we may buy it out and out, for ever." This was Nelly's salutation as she came back full of all she had seen, and glowing with enthusiasm over the splendid luxuriance of the vegetation and the beauty of the view.

"It is really princely inside, although in terrible dilapidation and ruin. There are over two of the fireplaces the Doge's arms, which shows that a Venetian magnate once lived there."

"What do you say, George?" cried Bramleigh. "Don't you think you'd rather invest some hundred florins in a boat to escape from this dreary hole than purchase a prison to live in?

"You must come and see the 'Fontanella'—so they call it—before you decide," said Julia. "Meanwhile here is a rough sketch I made from the garden side."

"Come, that looks very pretty, indeed," cried George. "Do you mean to say it is like that?"

"That's downright beautiful!" said Bramleigh. "Surely these are not marble—these columns!"

"It is all marble—the terrace, the balconies, the stairs, the door-frames; and as to the floors, they are laid down in variegated slabs, with a marvellous instinct as to colour and effect. I declare I think it handsomer than Castello," cried Nelly.

"Haven't I often said," exclaimed Bramleigh, "there was nothing like being ruined to impart a fresh zest to existence? You seem to start anew in the race and unweighted too."

"As George and I have always been in the condition you speak of," said Julia, "this charm of novelty is lost to us."

"Let us put it to the vote," said Nelly, eagerly. "Shall we buy it?"

"First of all let us see it," interposed Bramleigh. "To-day I have to make my visit to the authorities. I have to present myself before the great officials, and announce that I have come to be the representative of the last joint of the British lion's tail; but that he being a great beast of wonderful strength and terrific courage, to touch a hair of him is temerity itself."

"And they will believe you?" asked Julia.

"Of course they will. It would be very hard that we should not survive in the memories of people who live in lonely spots and read no newspapers."

"Such a place for vegetation I never saw," cried Nelly. "There are no glass windows in the hall, but through the ornamental ironwork the oranges and limes pierce through and hang in great clusters; the whole covered with the crimson acanthus and the blue japonica, till the very brilliancy of colour actually dazzles you."

"We'll write a great book up there, George—'Cattaro under the Doges:' or shall it be a romance?" said Bramleigh.

"I'm for a diary," said Julia, "where each of us shall contribute his share of life among the wild-olives."

"Ju's right," cried Nelly; "and as I have no gift of authorship, I'll be the public."

"No, you shall be the editor, dearest," said Julia; "he is always like the Speaker in the House—the person who does the least and endures the most."

"All this does not lead us to any decision," said

L'Estrange. "Shall I go up there all alone, and report to you this evening what I see and what I think of the place?"

This proposal was at once acceded to; and now they went their several ways, not to meet again till a late dinner.

"How nobly and manfully your brother bears up," said Julia, as she walked back to the inn with Nelly.

"And there is no display in it," said Nelly, warmly. "Now that he is beyond the reach of condolence and compassion, he fears nothing. And you will see that when the blow falls, as he says it must, he will not wince nor shrink."

"If I had been a man I should like to have been of that mould."

"And it is exactly what you would have been, dear Julia. Gusty said, only yesterday, that you had more courage than us all."

When L'Estrange returned, he came accompanied by an old man in very tattered clothes, and the worst possible hat, whose linen was far from spotless, as were his hands innocent of soap. He was, however, the owner of the villa, and a Count of the great family of Kreptowicz. If his appearance was not much in his favour, his manners were those of a well-bred person, and his language that of education. He was eager to part with this villa, as he desired to go and live with a married daughter at Ragusa; and he protested that, at the price he asked, it was not a sale, but a present; that to any other than Englishmen he never would part with a property that had been six hundred years in the family, and which contained the bones of his distinguished ancestors, of which, incidentally, he threw in small historic details; and, last of all, he avowed that he desired to confide the small chapel where these precious remains were deposited to the care of men of station and character. This chapel was only used once a year, when a mass for the dead was celebrated, so that the Count insisted no inconvenience could be incurred by the tenant. Indeed, he half hinted that, if that one annual celebration were objected to, his ancestors might be prayed for elsewhere, or even rest satisfied with the long course of devotion to their interests which had been maintained up to the present time. As for the chapel itself, he described it as a gem that even Venice could not rival. There were frescoes of marvellous beauty, and some carvings in wood and ivory that were priceless. Some years back he had employed a great artist to restore some of the paintings,

and supply the place of others that were beyond restoration, and now it was in a state of perfect condition, as he would be proud to show them.

"You are aware that we are heretics, monsieur?" said Julia.

"We are all sons of Adam, mademoiselle," said he, with a polite bow; and it was clear that he could postpone spiritual questions to such time as temporal matters might be fully completed.

As the chapel was fully twenty minutes' walk from the villa, and much higher on the mountain side, had it even been frequented by the country people it could not have been any cause of inconvenience to the occupants of the villa; and this matter being settled, and some small conditions as to surrender being agreed to, Bramleigh engaged to take it for three years, with a power to purchase if he desired it.

Long after the contract was signed and completed, the old Count continued, in a half-complaining tone, to dwell on the great sacrifice he had made, what sums of money were to be made of the lemons and oranges, how the figs were celebrated even at Ragusa, and Fontanella melons had actually brought ten kreutzers—three-halfpence—apiece in the market at Zara.

"Who is it?" cried Julia, as the old man took his leave, "who said that the old mercantile spirit never died out in the great Venetian families, and that the descendants of the doges, with all their pride of blood and race, were dealers and traders whenever an occasion of gain presented itself?"

"Our old friend there has not belied the theory," said Bramleigh; "but I am right glad that we have secured La Fontanella."

CHAPTER LI.

SOME NEWS FROM WITHOUT.

THERE is a sad significance in the fact that the happiest days of our lives are those most difficult to chronicle; it is as though the very essence of enjoyment was its uneventful nature. Thus was it that the little household at the Fontanella felt their present existence. Its simple pleasures, its peacefulness never palled upon them. There was that amount of general similarity in tastes amongst them that secures concord, and that variety of disposition and temperament which promotes and sustains interest.

Julia was the life of all; for, though seeming to devote herself to the cares of housethrift and management, and in reality carrying on all the details of management, it was she who gave to their daily life its colour and flavour; she who suggested occupations and interest to each; and while Augustus was charged to devote his gun and his rod to the replenishment of the larder, George was converted into a gardener; all the decorative department of the household being confided to Nelly, who made the bouquets for the breakfast and dinner-tables, arranged the fruit in artistic fashion, and was supreme in exacting dinner-dress and the due observance of all proper etiquette. Julia was inflexible on this point; for, as she said, "though people laugh at deposed princes for their persistence in maintaining a certain state and a certain pageantry in their exile, without these, what becomes of their prestige, and what becomes of themselves? they merge into a new existence, and lose their very identity. We, too, may be 'restored' one of these days, and let it be our care not to have forgotten the habits of our station." There was in this, as in most she said, a semi-seriousness that made one doubt when she was in earnest; and this half-quizzing manner enabled her to carry out her will and bear down opposition in many cases where a sterner logic would have failed her.

Her greatest art of all, however, was to induce the others to believe that the chief charm of their present existence

was its isolation. She well knew that while she herself and Nelly would never complain of the loneliness of their lives, their estrangement from the world and all its pursuits, its pleasures and its interests, the young men would soon discover what monotony marked their days, how uneventful they were, and how uniform. To convert all these into merits, to make them believe that this immunity from the passing accidents of life was the greatest of blessings, to induce them to regard the peace in which they lived as the highest charm that could adorn existence, and at the same time not suffer them to lapse into dreamy inactivity or lethargic indifference, was a great trial of skill, and it was hers to achieve it. As she said, not without a touch of vainglory, one day to Nelly, "How intensely eager I have made them about small things. Your brother was up at daylight to finish his rock-work for the creepers, and George felled that tree for the keel of his new boat before breakfast. Think of that, Nelly; and neither of them as much as asked if the post had brought them letters and newspapers. Don't laugh, dearest. When men forget the post-hour, there is something wonderfully good or bad has befallen them."

"But it is strange, after all, Ju, how little we have come to care for the outer world. I protest I am glad to think that there are only two mails a week—a thing that when we came here, I would have pronounced unendurable."

"To George and myself it matters little," said Julia, and her tone had a touch of sadness in it, in spite of her attempt to smile. "It would not be easy to find two people whom the world can live without at so little cost. There is something in that, Nelly; though I'm not sure that, it is all gain."

"Well, you have your recompense, Julia," said the other, affectionately, "for there is a little 'world' here could not exist without you."

"Two hares, and something like a black cock—they call it a caper, here," cried Augustus, from beneath the window. "Come down, and let us have breakfast on the terrace. By the way, I have just got a letter in Cutbill's hand. It has been a fortnight in coming, but I only glanced at the date of it."

As they gathered around the breakfast-table they were far more eager to learn what had been done in the garden, and what progress was being made with the fish-pond, than to hear Mr. Cutbill's news, and his letter lay open, till nigh

the end of the meal, on the table before any one thought of it.

"Who wants to read Cutbill?" said Augustus, indolently.

"Not I, Gusty, if he writes as he talks."

"Do you know, I thought him very pleasant?" said L'Estrange. "He told me so much that I had never heard of, and made such acute remarks on life and people."

"Poor dear George was so flattered by Mr. Cutbill's praise of his boiled mutton, that he took quite a liking to the man; and when he declared that some poor little wine we gave him had a flavour of 'muscat' about it, like old Moselle, I really believe he might have borrowed money of us if he had wanted, and if we had had any."

"I wish you would read him aloud, Julia," said Augustus.

"With all my heart," said she, turning over the letter to see its length. "It does seem a long document, but it is a marvel of clear writing. Now for it: 'Naples, Hotel Victoria. My dear Bramleigh.' Of course you are his dear Bramleigh? Lucky, after all, that it's not dear Gusty."

"That's exactly what makes everything about that man intolerable to *me*," said Nelly. "The degree of intimacy between people is not to be measured by the inferior."

"I will have no discussions, no interruptions," said Julia. "If there are to be comments, they must be made by *me*."

"That's tyranny, I think," cried Nelly.

"I call it more than arrogance," said Augustus.

"My dear Bramleigh," continued Julia, reading aloud—"I followed the old Viscount down here, not in the best of tempers, I assure you; and though not easily outwitted or baffled in such matters, it was not till after a week that I succeeded in getting an audience. There's no denying it, he's the best actor on or off the boards in Europe. He met me coldly, haughtily. I had treated him badly, forsooth, shamefully; I had not deigned a reply to any of his letters. He had written me three—he wasn't sure there were not four letters—to Rome. He had sent me cards for the Pope's chapel—cards for Cardinal Somebody's receptions—cards for a concert at St. Paul's, outside the walls. I don't know what attentions he had not showered on me, nor how many of his high and titled friends had not called at a hotel where I never stopped, or left their names with a porter I never saw. I had to wait till he poured forth all this with a grand eloquence, at once disdainful and damaging; the peroration being in this wise—that such lapses as mine were things

unknown in the latitudes inhabited by well-bred people. 'These things are not done, Mr. Cutbill,' said he arrogantly; 'these things are not done! You may call them trivial omissions, mere trifles, casual forgetfulness, and such like; but even men who have achieved distinction, who have won fame and honours and reputation, as I am well aware is your case, would do well to observe the small obligations which the discipline of society enforces, and condescend to exchange that small coin of civilities which form the circulating medium of good manners.' When he had delivered himself of this he sat down overpowered, and though I, in very plain language, told him that I did not believe a syllable about the letters, nor accept one word of the lesson, he only fanned himself and bathed his temples with rose-water, no more heeding me or my indignation than if I had been one of the figures on his Japanese screen.

"'You certainly said you were stopping at the "Minerva,"' said he.

"'I certainly told your lordship I was at Spilman's.'

"He wanted to show me why this could not possibly be the case—how men like himself never made mistakes, and men like me continually did so—that the very essence of great men's lives was to attach importance to those smaller circumstances that inferior people disregarded, and so on; but I simply said, 'Let us leave that question where it is, and go on to a more important one. Have you had time to look over my account?'

"'If you had received the second of those letters you have with such unfeigned candour assured me were never written, you'd have seen that I only desire to know the name of your banker in town, that I may order my agent to remit the money.'

"'Let us make no more mistakes about an address, my lord,' said I. 'I'll take a cheque for the amount now,' and he gave it. He sat down and wrote me an order on Hedges and Holt, Pall Mall, for fifteen hundred pounds.

"I was so overcome by the promptitude and by the grand manner he handed it to me, that I am free to confess I was heartily ashamed of my previous rudeness, and would have given a handsome discount off my cheque to have been able to obliterate all memory of my insolence.

"'Is there anything more between us, Mr. Cutbill?' said he, politely, 'for I think it would be a mutual benefit if we could settle all our outlying transactions at the present interview.'

"'Well,' said I, 'there's that two thousand of the parson's, paid in, if you remember, after Portlaw's report to your lordship that the whole scheme must founder.'

"He tried to browbeat at this. It was a matter in which I had no concern; it was a question which Mr. L'Estrange was at full liberty to bring before the courts of law; my statement about Portlaw was incorrect; dates were against me, law was against me, custom was against me, and at last it was nigh dinner-hour, and time was against me; 'unless,' said he, with a change of voice I never heard equalled off the stage, 'you will stay and eat a very humble dinner with Temple and myself, for my lady is indisposed.'

"To be almost on fighting terms with a man ten minutes ago, and to accept his invitation to dinner now, seemed to me one of those things perfectly beyond human accomplishment; but the way in which he tendered the invitation, and the altered tone he imparted to his manner, made me feel that not to imitate him was to stamp myself for ever as one of those vulgar dogs whom he had just been ridiculing, and I assented.

"I have a perfect recollection of a superb dinner, but beyond that, and that the champagne was decanted, and that there was a large cheese stuffed with truffles, and that there were ortolans in ice, I know nothing. It was one of the pleasantest evenings I ever passed in my life. I sang several songs, and might have sung more if a message had not come from my lady to beg that the piano might be stopped, an intimation which closed the *séance*, and I said good-night. The next morning Temple called to say my lord was too much engaged to be able to receive me again, and as to that little matter I had mentioned, he had an arrangement to propose which might be satisfactory; and whether it was that my faculties were not the clearer for my previous night's convivialities, or that Temple's explanations were of the most muddled description, or that the noble lord had purposely given him a tangled skein to unravel, I don't know, but all I could make out of the proposed arrangement was that he wouldn't give any money back—no, not on any terms: to do so would be something so derogatory to himself, to his rank, to his position in diplomacy, it would amount to a self-accusation of fraud; what would be thought of him by his brother peers, by society, by the world, and by THE OFFICE?

"He had, however, the alternate presentation to the living of Oxington in Herts. It was two hundred and forty

pounds per annum and a house—in fact 'a provision more than ample,' he said, 'for any man not utterly a worldling.' He was not sure whether the next appointment lay with himself or a certain Sir Marcus Cluff—a retired fishmonger, he thought—then living at Rome; but as well as I could make out, if it was Lord Culduff's turn he would appoint L'Estrange, and if it was Cluff's we were to cajole, or to bully, or to persuade him out of it; and L'Estrange was to be inducted as soon as the present incumbent, who only wanted a few months of ninety, was promoted to a better place. This may all seem very confused, dim, and unintelligible, but it is a plain ungarbled statement in comparison with what I received from Temple—who, to do him justice, felt all the awkwardness of being sent out to do something he didn't understand by means that he never possessed. He handed me, however, a letter for Cluff from the noble Viscount, which I was to deliver at once; and, in fact, this much was intelligible, that the sooner I took myself away from Naples, in any direction I liked best, the better. There are times when it is as well not to show that you see the enemy is cheating you, when the shrewdest policy is to let him deem you a dupe and wait patiently till he has compromised himself beyond recall. In this sense I agreed to be the bearer of the letter, and started the same night for Rome.

"Cluff was installed at the same hotel where I was stopping, and I saw him the next morning. He was a poor broken-down creature, sitting in a room saturated with some peculiar vapour which seemed to agree with him, but half suffocated me. The Viscount's letter, however, very nearly put us on a level, for it took his breath away, and all but finished him.

"'Do you know, sir,' said he, 'that Lord Culduff talks here of a title to a presentation that I bought with the estate thirty years ago, and that he has no more right in the matter than he has to the manor-house. The vicarage is my sole gift, and though the present incumbent is but two-and-thirty, he means to resign and go out to New Zealand.' He maundered on about Lord Culduff's inexplicable blunder; what course he ought to adopt towards him; if it were actionable, or if a simple apology would be the best solution, and at last said, 'There was no one for whom he had a higher esteem than Mr. L'Estrange, and that if I would give him his address he would like to communicate with him personally in the matter.' This looked at least favourable, and I

gave it with great willingness; but I am free to own I have become now so accustomed to be jockeyed at every step I go, that I wouldn't trust the Pope himself, if he promised me anything beyond his blessing.

"I saw Cluff again to-day, and he said he had half-written his letter to L'Estrange; but being his postfumigation day, when his doctor enjoined complete repose, he could not complete or post the document till Saturday. I have thought it best, however, to apprise you, and L'Estrange through you, that such a letter is on its way to Cattaro, and I trust with satisfactory intelligence. And now that I must bring this long narrative to an end, I scarcely know whether I shall repeat a scandal you may have heard already, or, more probably still, not like to hear now, but it is the town-talk here; that Pracontal, or Count Bramleigh—I don't know which name he is best known by—is to marry Lady Augusta. Some say that the marriage will depend on the verdict of the trial being in his favour; others declare that she has accepted him unconditionally. I was not disposed to believe the story, but Cluff assures me that it is unquestionable, and that he knows a lady to whom Lady Augusta confided this determination. And, as Cluff says, such an opportunity of shocking the world will not occur every day, and it cannot be expected she could resist the temptation.

"I am going back to England at once, and I enclose you my town address in case you want me: '4, Joy Court, Cannon Street.' The Culduff mining scheme is now wound up, and the shareholders have signed a consent. Their first dividend of fourpence will be paid in January, future payment will be announced by notice. Tell L'Estrange, however, not to 'come in,' but to wait.

"If I can be of service in any way, make use of me, and if I cannot, don't forget me, but think of me as, what I once overheard L'Estrange's sister call me—a well-meaning snob, and very faithfully yours,

"T. Cutbill."

CHAPTER LII.

ISCHIA.

The sun had just sunk below the horizon, and a blaze of blended crimson and gold spread over the Bay of Naples, colouring the rocky island of Ischia till it glowed like a carbuncle. Gradually, however, the rich warm tints began to fade away from the base of the mountains, and a cold blue colour stole slowly up their sides, peak after peak surrendering their gorgeous panoply, till at length the whole island assumed a tinge blue as the sea it stood in.

But for the memory of the former glory it would have been difficult to imagine a more beautiful picture. Every cliff and jutting promontory tufted with wild olives and myrtle was reflected in the waveless sea below; and feathery palm-trees and broad-leaved figs trembled in the water, as that gentle wash eddied softly round the rocks, or played on the golden shore.

It was essentially the hour of peace and repose. Along the shores of the bay, in every little village, the angelus was ringing, and kneeling groups were bowed in prayer; and even here, on this rocky islet, where crime and wretchedness were sent to expiate by years of misery their sins against their fellow-men, the poor galley-slaves caught one instant of kindred with the world, and were suffered to taste in peace the beauty of the hour. There they were in little knots and groups—some lying listlessly in the deep grass; some gathered on a little rocky point, watching the fish as they darted to and fro in the limpid water, and doubtless envying their glorious freedom: and others, again, seated under some spreading tree, and seeming, at least, to feel the calm influence of the hour.

The soldiers who formed their guard had piled their arms, leaving here and there merely a sentinel, and had gone down amongst the rocks, to search for limpets, or those rugged "ricci di mare" which humble palates accept as delicacies. A few, too, dashed in for a swim, and their joyous voices and merry laughter were heard amid the plash of the water they disported in.

In a small cleft of a rock overshadowed by an old ilex-tree two men sat moodily gazing on the sea. In dress they were indeed alike, for both wore that terrible red and yellow livery that marks a life-long condemnation, and each carried the heavy chain of the same terrible sentence. They were linked together at the ankle, and thus, for convenience' sake, they sat shoulder to shoulder. One was a thin, spare, but still wiry-looking man, evidently far advanced in life, but with a vigour in his look and a quick intelligence in his eye that showed what energy he must have possessed in youth. He had spent years at the galleys, but neither time nor the degradation of his associations had completely eradicated the traces of something above the common in his appearance; for No. 97—he had no other name as a prisoner—had been condemned for his share in a plot against the life of the king; three of his associates having been beheaded for their greater criminality. What station he might originally have belonged to was no longer easy to determine; but there were yet some signs that indicated that he had been at least in the middle rank of life. His companion was unlike him in every way. He was a young man with fresh complexion and large blue eyes, the very type of frankness and good-nature. Not even prison diet and discipline had yet hollowed his cheek, though it was easy to see that unaccustomed labour and distasteful food were beginning to tell upon his strength, and the bitter smile with which he was gazing on his lank figure and wasted hands showed the weary misery that was consuming him.

"Well, old Nick," said the young man at length, "this is to be our last evening together; and if ever I should touch land again, is there any way I could help you—is there anything I could do for you?"

"So then you're determined to try it?" said the other, in a low growling tone.

"That I am. I have not spent weeks filing through that confounded chain for nothing: one wrench now and it's smashed."

"And then?" asked the old man with a grin.

"And then I'll have a swim for it. I know all that—I know it all," said he, answering a gesture of the other's hand; "but do you think I care to drag out such a life as this?"

"*I* do," was the quiet reply.

"Then why you do is clear and clean beyond me. To me it is worse than fifty deaths."

"Look here, lad," said the old man, with a degree of animation he had not shown before. "There are four hundred and eighty of us here: some for ten, some for twenty years, some for life; except yourself alone there is not one has the faintest chance of a pardon. You are English, and your nation takes trouble about its people, and, right or wrong, in the end gets them favourable treatment, and yet you are the only man here would put his life in jeopardy on so poor a chance."

"I'll try it, for all that."

"Did you ever hear of a man that escaped by swimming?"

"If they didn't it was their own fault—at least they gave themselves no fair chance: they always made for the shore, and generally the nearest shore, and of course they were followed and taken. I'll strike out for the open sea, and when I have cut the cork floats off a fishing-net, I'll be able to float for hours, if I should tire swimming. Once in the open, it will be hard luck if some coasting vessel, some steamer to Palermo or Messina, should not pick me up. Besides, there are numbers of fishing-boats——"

"Any one of which would be right glad to make five ducats by bringing you safe back to the police."

"I don't believe it—I don't believe there is that much baseness in a human heart."

"Take my word for it, there are depths a good deal below even that," said the old man, with a harsh grating laugh.

"No matter, come what will of it, I'll make the venture; and now, as our time is growing short, tell me if there is anything I can do for you, if I live to get free again. Have you any friends who could help you? or is there any one to whom you would wish me to go on your behalf?"

"None—none," said he, slowly but calmly.

"As yours was a political crime——"

"I have done all of them, and if my life were to be drawn out for eighty years longer it would not suffice for all the sentences against me."

"Still I'd not despair of doing something——"

"Look here, lad," said the other, sharply; "it is my will that all who belong to me should believe me dead. I was shipwrecked twelve years ago, and reported to have gone down with all the crew. My son——"

"Have you a son, then?"

"My son inherits rights that, stained as I am by crime and condemnation, I never could have maintained. Whether

he shall make them good or not will depend on whether he has more or less of *my* blood in his veins. It may be, however, he will want money to prosecute his claim. I have none to send him, but I could tell him where he is almost certain to find not only money, but what will serve him more than money, if you could make him out. I have written some of the names he is known by on this paper, and he can be traced through Bolton, the banker at Naples. Tell him to seek out all the places old Giacomo Lami worked at. He never painted his daughter Enrichetta in a fresco, that he didn't hide gold, or jewels, or papers of value somewhere near. Tell him, above all, to find out where Giacomo's last work was executed. You can say that you got this commission from me years ago in Monte Video; and when you tell him it was Niccolo Baldassare gave it, he'll believe you. There. I have written Giacomo Lami on that paper, so that you need not trust to your memory. But why do I waste time with these things? You'll never set foot on shore, lad —never."

"I am just as certain that I shall. If that son of yours was only as certain of winning his estate, I'd call him a lucky fellow. But see, they are almost dressed. They'll be soon ready to march us home. Rest your foot next this rock till I smash the link, and when you see them coming roll this heavy stone down into the sea. I'll make for the south side of the island, and, once night falls, take to the water. Good-bye, old fellow. I'll not forget you—never, never,' and he wrung the old man's hand in a strong grasp. The chain gave way at the second blow, and he was gone.

Just as the last flickering light was fading from the sky, three cannon shots, in quick succession, announced that a prisoner had made his escape, and patrols issued forth in every direction to scour the island, while boats were manned to search the caves and crevasses along the shore.

The morning's telegram to the Minister of Police ran thus: "No. 11 made his escape last evening, filing his ankle-iron. The prisoner 97, to whom he was linked, declares that he saw him leap into the sea and sink. This statement is not believed; but up to this, no trace of the missing man has been discovered."

In the afternoon of the same day, Temple Bramleigh learned the news, and hastened home to the hotel to inform his chief. Lord Culduff was not in the best of tempers. Some independent member below the gangway had given

notice of a question he intended to ask the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and the leader of a Radical morning paper had thus paraphrased the inquiry: "What Mr. Bechell wishes to ascertain, in fact, amounts to this,—'Could not the case of Samuel Rogers have been treated by our resident envoy at Naples, or was it necessary that the dignity and honour of England should be maintained by an essenced old fop, whose social successes—and we never heard that he had any other—date from the early days of the Regency?'"

Lord Culduff was pacing his room angrily when Temple entered, and, although nothing would have induced him to show the insolent paragraph of the paper, he burst out into a violent abuse of those meddlesome Radicals, whose whole mission in life was to assail men of family and station.

"In the famous revolution of France, sir," cried he, "they did their work with the guillotine; but our cowardly canaille never rise above defamation. You must write to the papers about this, Temple. You must expose this system of social assassination, or the day will come, if it has not already come, when gentlemen of birth and blood will refuse to serve the Crown."

"I came back to tell you that our man has made his escape," said Temple, half trembling at daring to interrupt this flow of indignation.

"And whom do you call our man, sir?"

"I mean Rogers—the fellow we have been writing about."

"How and when has this happened?"

Temple proceeded to repeat what he had learned at the prefecture of the police, and read out the words of the telegram.

"Let us see," said Lord Culduff, seating himself in a well-cushioned chair. "Let us see what new turn this will give the affair. He may be recaptured, or he may be, most probably is, drowned. We then come in for compensation. They must indemnify. There are few claims so thoroughly chronic in their character as those for an indemnity. You first discuss the right, and you then higgle over the arithmetic. I don't want to go back to town this season. See to it then, Temple, that we reserve this question entirely to ourselves. Let Blagden refer everything to us."

"They have sent the news home already."

"Oh! they have. Very sharp practice. Not peculiar for any extreme delicacy either. But I cannot dine with Blagden, for all that. This escape gives a curious turn to the whole

affair. Let us look into it a little. I take it the fellow must have gone down—eh?"

"Most probably."

"Or he might have been picked up by some passing steamer or by a fishing-boat. Suppose him to have got free, he'll get back to England, and make capital out of the adventure. These fellows understand all that nowadays."

Temple, seeing a reply was expected, assented.

"So that we must not be precipitate, Temple," said Lord Culduff, slowly. "It's a case for caution."

These words, and the keen look that accompanied them, were perfect puzzles to Temple, and he did not dare to speak.

"The thing must be done this wise," said Lord Culduff. "It must be a 'private and confidential' to the office, and a 'sly and ambiguous' to the public prints. I'll charge myself with the former; the latter shall be your care, Temple. You are intimate with Flosser, the correspondent of the *Bell-Weather*. Have him to dinner and be indiscreet. This old Madeira here will explain any amount of expansiveness. Get him to talk of this escape, and let out the secret that it was we who managed it all. Mind, however, that you swear him not to reveal anything. It would be your ruin, you must say, if the affair got wind; but the fact was Lord Culduff saw the Neapolitans were determined not to surrender him, and, knowing what an insult it would be to the public feeling of England that an Englishman was held as a prisoner at the galleys, for an act of heroism and gallantry, the only course was to liberate him at any cost and in any way. Flosser will swear secrecy, but hints at this solution as the *on dit* in certain keen coteries. Such a mode of treating the matter carries more real weight than a sworn affidavit. Men like the problem that they fancy they have unravelled by their own acuteness. And then it muzzles discussion in the House, since even the most blatant Radical sees that it cannot be debated openly; for all Englishmen, as a rule, love compensation, and we can only claim indemnification here on the assumption that we were no parties to the escape. Do you follow me, Temple?"

"I believe I do. I see the drift of it at last."

"There's no drift, sir. It is a full, palpable, well-delivered blow. We saved Rogers; but we refuse to explain how."

"And if he turns up one of these days, and refuses to confirm us?"

"Then we denounce him as an impostor; but always, mark you, in the same shadowy way that we allude to our share in his evasion. It must be a sketch in water-colours throughout, Temple—very faint and very transparent. When I have rough-drafted my despatch you shall see it. Once the original melody is before you, you will see there is nothing to do but invent the variations."

"My lady wishes to know, my lord, if your lordship will step upstairs to speak to her?" said a servant at this conjuncture.

"Go up, Temple, and see what it is," whispered Lord Culduff. "If it be about that box at the St. Carlos, you can say our stay here is now most uncertain. If it be a budget question, she must wait till quarter-day." He smiled maliciously as he spoke, and waved his hand to dismiss him. Within a minute—it seemed scarcely half that time—Lady Culduff entered the room, with an open letter in her hand; her colour was high, and her eyes flashing, as she said:—

"Make your mind at ease, my lord. It is no question of an opera-box, or a milliner's bill, but it is a matter of much importance that I desire to speak about. Will you do me the favour to read that, and say what answer I shall return to it?"

Lord Culduff took the letter and read it over leisurely, and then, laying it down, said, "Lady Augusta is not a very perspicuous letter-writer, or else she feels her present task too much for her tact, but what she means here is, that you should give M. Pracontal permission to ransack your brother's house for documents, which, if discovered, might deprive him of the title to his estate. The request, at least, has modesty to recommend it."

"The absurdity is, to my thinking, greater than even the impertinence," cried Lady Culduff. "She says, that on separating two pages, which, by some accident had adhered, of Giacomo Lami's journal,—whoever Giacomo Lami may be,—*we*,—*we* being Pracontal and herself—have discovered that it was Giacomo's habit to conceal important papers in the walls where he painted, and in all cases where he introduced his daughter's portrait; and that as in the octagon room at Castello there is a picture of her as Flora, it is believed—confidently believed—such documents will be found there as will throw great light on the present claim——"

"First of all," said he, interrupting, "is there such a portrait?"

"There is a Flora; I never heard it was a portrait. Who could tell after what the artist copied it?"

"Lady Augusta assumes to believe this story."

"Lady Augusta is only too glad to believe what everybody else would pronounce incredible; but this is not all, she has the inconceivable impertinence to prefer this request to us, to make us a party to our own detriment,—as if it were matter of perfect indifference who possessed these estates, and who owned Castello."

"I declare I have heard sentiments from your brother Augustus that would fully warrant this impression. I have a letter of his in my desk wherein he distinctly says, that once satisfied in his own mind—not to the conviction of his lawyer, mark you, nor to the conviction of men well versed in evidence, and accustomed to sift testimony, but simply in his own not very capacious intellect—that the estate belongs to Pracontal, he'll yield him up the possession without dispute or delay."

"He's a fool! there is no other name for him," said she, passionately.

"Yes, and his folly is very mischievous folly, for he is abrogating rights he has no pretension to deal with. It is as well, at all events, that this demand was addressed to us and not to your brother, for I'm certain he'd not have refused his permission."

"I know it," said she, fiercely; "and if Lady Augusta only knew his address and how a letter might reach him, she would never have written to us. Time pressed, however; see what she says here. 'The case will come on for trial in November, and if the papers have the value and significance Count Pracontal's lawyers suspect, there will yet be time to make some arrangement,—the Count would be disposed for a generous one,—which might lessen the blow, and diminish the evil consequences of a verdict certain to be adverse to the present possessor.'"

"She dissevers her interests from those of her late husband's family with great magnanimity, I must say."

"The horrid woman is going to marry Pracontal."

"They say so, but I doubt it—at least, till he comes out a victor."

"How she could have dared to write this, how she could have had the shamelessness to ask *me*,—*me* whom she certainly ought to know,—to aid and abet a plot directed against the

estates—the very legitimacy of my family—is more than I can conceive."

"She's an implicit believer, one must admit, for she says, 'if on examining the part of the wall behind the pedestal of the figure nothing shall be found, she desires no further search.' The spot is indicated with such exactness in the journal, that she limits her request distinctly to this."

"Probably she thought the destruction of a costly fresco might well have been demurred to," said Lady Culduff, angrily. "Not but, for my part, I'd equally refuse her leave to touch the moulding in the surbase. I am glad, however, she has addressed this demand to us, for I know well Augustus is weak enough to comply with it, and fancy himself a hero in consequence. There is something piquant in the way she hints that she is asking as a favour what, for all she knows, might be claimed as a right. Imagine a woman saying this!"

"It is like asking me for the key of my writing-desk to see if I have not some paper or letter there, that might, if published, give me grave inconvenience."

"I have often heard of her eccentricities and absurdities, but on this occasion I believe she has actually outdone herself. I suppose, though this appeal is made to us conjointly, as it is addressed to me, I am the proper person to reply to it."

"Certainly, my lady."

"And I may say—Lord Culduff feels shocked equally with myself at the indelicacy of the step you have just taken; failing to respect the tie which connects you with our family, you might, he opines, have had some regard for the decencies which regulate social intercourse, and while bearing our name, not have ranked yourself with those who declare themselves our enemies. I may say this, I may tell that her conduct is shameless, an outrage on all feeling, and not only derogatory to her station, but unwomanly?"

"I don't think I'd say that," said he, with a faint simper, while he patted his hand with a gold paper-knife. "I opine the better way would be to accept her ladyship's letter as the most natural thing in life *from her;* that she had preferred a request, which coming from *her*, was all that was right and reasonable. That there was something very noble and very elevated in the way she could rise superior to personal interests, and the ties of kindred, and actually assert the claims of mere justice; but I'd add that the decision could

not lie with us—that your brother being the head of the family, was the person to whom the request must be addressed, and that we would, with her permission, charge ourselves with the task. Pray hear me out—first of all, we have a delay while she replies to this, with or without the permission we ask for; in that interval you can inform your brother that a very serious plot is being concerted against him; that your next letter will fully inform him as to the details of the conspiracy—your present advice being simply for warning, and then, when, if she still persist, the matter must be heard, it will be strange if Augustus shall not have come to the conclusion that the part intended for him is a very contemptible one—that of a dupe."

"Your lordship's mode may be more diplomatic; mine would be more direct."

"Which is exactly its demerit, my lady," said he, with one of his blandest smiles. "In *my* craft the great secret is never to give a flat refusal to anything. If the French were to ask us for the Isle of Wight, the proper reply would be a polite demand for the reasons that prompted the request—whether 'Osborne' might be reserved—and a courteous assurance that the claim should meet with every consideration and a cordial disposition to make every possible concession that might lead to a closer union with a nation it was our pride and happiness to reckon on as an ally."

"These fallacies never deceive any one."

"Nor are they meant to do so, any more than the words 'your most obedient and humble servant' at the foot of a letter; but they serve to keep correspondence within polite limits."

"And they consume time," broke she in, impatiently.

"And, as you observe so aptly, they consume time."

"Let us have done with trifling, my lord. I mean to answer this letter in my own way."

"I can have no other objection to make to that, save the unnecessary loss of time I have incurred in listening to the matter."

"That time so precious to the nation you serve!" said she, sneeringly.

"Your ladyship admirably expresses my meaning."

"Then, my lord, I make you the only amends in my power; I take my leave of you."

"Your ladyship's politeness is never at fault," said he, rising to open the door for her.

"Has Temple told you that the box on the lower tier is now free—the box I spoke of?"

"He has; but our stay here is now uncertain. It may be days; it may be hours——"

"And why was not I told? I have been giving orders to tradespeople—accepting invitations—making engagements, and what not. Am I to be treated like the wife of a subaltern in a marching regiment—to hold myself ready to start when the route comes?"

"How I could envy that subaltern," said he, with an inimitable mixture of raillery and deference.

She darted on him a look of indignant anger, and swept out of the room.

Lord Culduff rang his bell, and told the servant to beg Mr. Temple Bramleigh would have the kindness to step down to him.

"Write to Filangieri, Temple," said he, "and say that I desire to have access to the prisoner Rogers. We know nothing of his escape, and the demand will embarrass—There, don't start objections, my dear boy; I never play a card without thinking what the enemy will do after he scores the trick."

And with this profound encomium on himself he dismissed the secretary, and proceeded to read the morning papers.

CHAPTER LIII.

A RAINY NIGHT AT SEA.

The absurd demand preferred by Lady Augusta in her letter to Marion was a step taken without any authority from Pracontal, and actually without his knowledge. On the discovery of the adhering pages of the journal, and their long consideration of the singular memorandum that they found within, Pracontal carried away the book to Longworth to show him the passage and ask what importance he might attach to its contents.

Longworth was certainly struck by the minute particularity with which an exact place was indicated. There was a rough pen sketch of the Flora, and a spot marked by a cross at the base of the pedestal, with the words, "Here will be found the books." Lower down on the same page was written, "These volumes, which I did not obtain without difficulty, and which were too cumbrous to carry away, I have deposited in this safe place, and the time may come when they will be of value.—G. L."

"Now," said Longworth, after some minutes of deep thought, "Lami was a man engaged in every imaginable conspiracy. There was not a state in Europe, apparently, where he was not, to some extent, compromised. These books he refers to may be the records of some secret society, and he may have stored them there as a security against the lukewarmness or the treachery of men whose fate might be imperilled by certain documents. Looking to the character of Lami, his intense devotion to these schemes, and his crafty nature and the Italian forethought which seems always to have marked whatever he did, I half incline to this impression. Then, on the other hand, you remember, Pracontal, when we went over to Portshandon to inquire about the registry books, we heard that they had all been stolen or destroyed by the rebels in '98?"

"Yes. I remember that well. I had not attached any importance to the fact; but I remember how much Kelson was disconcerted and put out by the intelligence, and how he continually repeated, 'This is no accident; this is no accident.'"

"It would be a rare piece of fortune if they were the church books, and that they contained a formal registry of the marriage."

"But who doubts it?"

"Say rather, my dear friend, why should any one believe it? Just think for one moment who Montague Bramleigh was, what was his station and his fortune, and then remember the interval that separated him from the Italian painter—a man of a certain ability, doubtless. Is it the most likely thing in the world that if the young Englishman fell in love with the beautiful Italian, that he would have sacrificed his whole ambition in life to his passion? Is it not far more probable, in fact, that no marriage whatever united them? Come, come, Pracontal, this is not, now at least, a matter to grow sulky over; you cannot be angry or indignant at my frankness, and you'll not shoot me for this slur on your grandmother's fair reputation."

"I certainly think that with nothing better than a theory to support it, you might have spared her memory this aspersion."

"If I had imagined you could not talk of it as unconcernedly as myself, I assure you I would never have spoken about it."

"You see now, however, that you have mistaken me—that you have read me rather as one of your own people than as a Frenchman," said the other, warmly.

"I certainly see that I must not speak to you with frankness, and I shall use caution not to offend you by candour."

"This is not enough, sir," said the Frenchman, rising and staring angrily at him.

"What is not enough?" said Longworth, with a perfect composure.

"Not enough for apology, sir; not enough as *amende* for an unwarrantable and insolent calumny."

"You are getting angry at the sound of your own voice, Pracontal. I now tell you that I never meant—never could have meant—to offend you. You came to me for a counsel which I could only give by speaking freely what was in my mind. This is surely enough for explanation."

"Then let it all be forgotten at once," cried the other, warmly.

"I'll not go that far," said Longworth, in the same calm tone as before. "You have accepted my explanation; you

have recognized what one moment of justice must have convinced you of—that I had no intention to wound your feelings. There is certainly, however, no reason in the world why I should expose my own to any unnecessary injury. I have escaped a peril; I have no wish to incur another of the same sort."

"I don't think I understand you," said Pracontal, quickly. "Do you mean we should quarrel?"

"By no means."

"That we should separate, then?"

"Certainly."

The Frenchman became pale, and suddenly his face flushed till it was deep crimson, and his eyes flashed with fire. The effort to be calm was almost a strain beyond his strength; but he succeeded, and in a voice scarcely above a whisper, he said, "I am deeply in your debt. I cannot say how deeply. My lawyer, however, does know, and I will confer with him."

"This is a matter of small consequence, and does not press: besides, I beg you will not let it trouble you."

The measured coldness with which these words were spoken seemed to jar painfully on Pracontal's temper, for he snatched his hat from the table, and with a hurred, "Adieu—adieu, then," left the room. The carriages of the hotel were waiting in the courtyard to convey the travellers to the station.

"Where is the train starting for?" asked he of a waiter.

"For Civita, sir."

"Step up to my room, then, and throw my clothes into a portmanteau—enough for a few days. I shall have time to write a note, I suppose?"

"Ample, sir. You have forty minutes yet."

Pracontal opened his writing-desk and wrote a few lines to Lady Augusta, to tell how a telegram had just called him away—it might be to Paris, perhaps London. He would be back within ten days, and explain all. He wished he might have her leave to write, but he had not a moment left him to ask the permission. Should he risk the liberty? What if it might displease her? He was every way unfortunate; nor, in all the days of a life of changes and vicissitudes, did he remember a sadder moment than this in which he wrote himself her devoted servant, A. Pracontal de Bramleigh. This done, he jumped into a carriage, and just reached the train in time to start for Civita.

There was little of exaggeration when he said he had never known greater misery and depression than he now felt. The

thought of that last meeting with Longworth overwhelmed him with sorrow. When we bear in mind how slowly and gradually the edifice of friendship is built up; how many of our prejudices have often to be overcome; how much of self-education is effected in the process; the thought that all this labour of time and feeling should be cast to the winds at once for a word of passion or a hasty expression, is humiliating to a degree. Pracontal had set great store by Longworth's friendship for him. He had accepted great favours at his hand; but so kindly and so gracefully conferred as to double the obligations by the delicacy with which they were bestowed. And this was the man whose good feeling for him he had outraged and insulted beyond recall. "If it had been an open quarrel between us, I could have stood his fire and shown him how thoroughly I knew myself in the wrong; but his cold disdain is more than I can bear. And what was it all about? How my old comrades would laugh if they heard that I had quarrelled with my best friend. Ah, my grandmother's reputation! *Ma foi*, how much more importance one often attaches to a word than to what it represents!" Thus angry with himself, mocking the very pretensions on which he had assumed to reprehend his friend, and actually ridiculing his own conduct, he embarked from Marseilles to hasten over to England, and entreat Kelson to discharge the money obligation which yet bound him to Longworth.

It was a rough night at sea, and the packet so crowded by passengers that Pracontal was driven to pass the night on deck. In the haste of departure he had not provided himself with overcoats or rugs, and was but ill suited to stand the severity of a night of cold cutting wind and occasional drifts of hail. To keep himself warm he walked the deck for hours, pacing rapidly to and fro: perhaps not sorry at heart that physical discomfort compelled him to dwell less on the internal griefs that preyed upon him. One solitary passenger besides himself had sought the deck, and he had rolled himself in a multiplicity of warm wrappers, and lay snugly under the shelter of the binnacle—a capacious tarpaulin cloak surmounting all his other integuments.

Pracontal's campaigning experiences had taught him that the next best thing to being well cloaked oneself is to lie near the man that is so; and thus, seeing that the traveller was fast asleep, he stretched himself under his lee, and even made free to draw a corner of the heavy tarpaulin over him.

"I say," cried the stranger, on discovering a neighbour; "I say, old fellow, you are coming it a bit too free and easy. You've stripped the covering off my legs."

"A thousand pardons," rejoined Pracontal. "I forgot to take my rugs and wraps with me; and I am shivering with cold. I have not even an overcoat."

The tone—so evidently that of a gentleman, and the slight touch of a foreign accent—apparently at once conciliated the stranger, for he said, "I have enough and to spare; spread this blanket over you; and here's a cushion for a pillow."

These courtesies, accepted frankly as offered, soon led them to talk together; and the two men speedily found themselves chatting away like old acquaintances.

"I am puzzling myself," said the stranger at last, "to find out are you an Englishman, who has lived long abroad, or are you a foreigner?"

"Is my English so good as that?" asked Pracontal, laughing.

"The very best I ever heard from any not a born Briton."

"Well, I'm a Frenchman—or a half Frenchman—with some Italian and some English blood, too, in me."

"Ah! I knew you must have had a dash of John Bull in you. No man ever spoke such English as yours without it."

"Well, but my English temperament goes two generations back. I don't believe my father was ever in England."

With this opening they talked away about national traits and peculiarities: the Frenchman with all the tact and acuteness travel and much intercourse with life conferred; and the other with the especial shrewdness that marks a Londoner. "How did you guess I was a Cockney?" asked he, laughingly. "I don't take liberties with my H's."

"If you had, it's not likely I'd have known it," said Pracontal. "But your reference to town, the fidelity with which you clung to what London would think of this, or say to that, made me suspect you to be a Londoner; and I see I was right."

"After all, you Frenchmen are just as full of Paris."

"Because Paris epitomizes France, and France is the greatest of all countries."

"I'll not stand that. I deny it *in toto*."

"Well, I'll not open the question now, or maybe, you'd make me give up this blanket."

"No. I'll have the matter out on fair grounds. Keep the blanket, but just let me hear on what grounds you claim precedence for France before England."

"I'm too unlucky in matters of dispute to-day," said Pra-

contal, sadly, "to open a new discussion. I quarrelled with, perhaps, the best friend I had in the world this morning for a mere nothing; and though there is little fear that anything we could say to each other now would provoke ill feeling between us, I'll run no risks."

"By Jove; it must be Scotch blood is in you. I never heard of such caution!"

"No, I believe my English connection is regular Saxon. When a man has been in the newspapers in England, he need not affect secrecy or caution in talking of himself. I figured in a trial lately; I don't know if you read the cause. It was tried in Ireland—Count Bramleigh de Pracontal against Bramleigh."

"What, are you Pracontal?" cried the stranger, starting to a sitting posture.

"Yes. Why are you so much interested?"

"Because I have seen the place. I have been over the property in dispute, and the question naturally interests me."

"Ha! you know Castello, then?"

"Castello, or Bishop's Folly. I know it best by the latter name."

"And whom am I speaking to?" said Pracontal; "for as you know me perhaps I have some right to ask this."

"My name is Cutbill; and now that you've heard it, you're nothing the wiser."

"You probably know the Bramleighs?"

"Every one of them; Augustus, the eldest, I am intimate with."

"It's not my fault that I have no acquaintance with him. I desired it much; and Lady Augusta conveyed my wish to Mr. Bramleigh, but he declined. I don't know on what grounds; but he refused to meet me, and we have never seen each other."

"If I don't greatly mistake, you ought to have met. I hope it may not be yet too late."

"Ah, but it is! We are *en pleine guerre* now, and the battle must be fought out. It is he, and not I, would leave the matter to this issue. I was for a compromise; I would have accepted an arrangement; I was unwilling to overthrow a whole family and consign them to ruin. They might have made their own terms with me; but no, they preferred to defy me. They determined I should be a mere pretender. They gave me no alternative; and I fight because there is no retreat open to me."

"And yet if you knew Bramleigh——"

"Mon cher, he would not give me the chance; he repulsed the offer I made; he would not touch the hand I held out to him."

"I am told that the judge declared that he never tried a cause where the defendant displayed a more honourable line of conduct."

"That is all true. Kelson, my lawyer, said that everything they did was straightforward and creditable; but he said, too, don't go near them, don't encourage any acquaintance with them, or some sort of arrangement will be patched up which will leave everything unsettled to another generation—when all may become once more litigated with less light to guide a decision and far less chance of obtaining evidence."

"Never mind the lawyers, Count, never mind the lawyers. Use your own good sense, and your own generous instincts; place yourself—in idea—in Bramleigh's position, and ask yourself could you act more handsomely than he has done? and then bethink you, what is the proper way to meet such conduct."

"It's all too late for this now; don't ask me why, but take my word for it, it is too late."

"It's never too late to do the right thing, though it may cost a man some pain to own he is changing his mind."

"It's not that; it's not that," said the other, peevishly, "though I cannot explain to you why or how."

"I don't want to hear secrets," said Cutbill, bluntly; "all the more that you and I are strangers to each other. I don't think either of us has had a good look at the other's face yet."

"I've seen yours, and I don't distrust it," said the Frenchman.

"Good night, then, there's a civil speech to go to sleep over," and so saying, he rolled over to the other side, and drew his blanket over his head.

Pracontal lay a long time awake, thinking of the strange companion he had chanced upon, and that still stranger amount of intimacy that had grown up between them. "I suppose," muttered he to himself, "I must be the most indiscreet fellow in the world; but after all, what have I said that he has not read in the newspapers, or may not read next week or the week after? I know how Kelson would condemn me for this careless habit of talking of myself and my affairs to the first man I meet on a railroad or a steamer;

but I must be what nature made me, and after all, if I show too much of my hand, I gain something by learning what the bystanders say of it."

It was not till nigh daybreak that he dropped off to sleep; and when he awoke it was to see Mr. Cutbill with a large bowl of hot coffee in one hand, and a roll in the other, making an early breakfast; a very rueful figure, too, was he —as, black with smoke and coal-dust, he propped himself against the binnacle, and gazed out over the waste of waters.

"You are a good sailor, I see, and don't fear sea-sickness," said Pracontal.

"Don't I? that's all you know of it; but I take everything they bring me. There's a rasher on its way to me now, if I survive this."

"I'm for a basin of cold water and coarse towels," said the other, rising.

"That's two points in your favour towards having English blood in you," said Cutbill, gravely, for already his qualms were returning; "when a fellow tells you he cares for soap, he can't be out and out a Frenchman." This speech was delivered with great difficulty, and when it was done he rolled over and covered himself up, over face and head, and spoke no more.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE LETTER BAG.

"WHAT a mail-bag!" cried Nelly, as she threw several letters on the breakfast-table; the same breakfast-table being laid under a spreading vine, all draped and festooned with a gorgeous clematis.

"I declare," said Augustus, "I'd rather look out yonder, over the blue gulf of Cattaro, than see all the post could bring me."

"This is for you," said Nelly, handing a letter to L'Estrange.

He reddened as he took it; not that he knew either the writing or the seal, but that terrible consciousness which besets the poor man in life leads him always to regard the unknown as pregnant with misfortune: and so he pocketed his letter, to read it when alone and unobserved.

"Here's Cutbill again. I don't think I care for more Cutbill," said Bramleigh; "and here's Sedley; Sedley will keep. This is from Marion."

"Oh, let us hear Marion by all means," said Nelly. "May I read her, Gusty?" He nodded, and she broke the envelope. "Ten lines and a postcript. She's positively expansive this time:—

"Victoria, Naples.

"'MY DEAR GUSTY,—Our discreet and delicate stepmother has written to ask me to intercede with you to permit M. Pracontal to pull down part of the house at Castello, to search for some family papers. I have replied that her demand is both impracticable and indecent. Be sure that you make a like answer if she addresses you personally. We mean to leave this soon; but are not yet certain in what direction. We have been shamefully treated, after having brought this troublesome and difficult negotiation to a successful end. We shall withdraw our proxy.

"'Yours ever, in much affection,

"'MARION CULDUFF.

"'P.S.—You have heard, I suppose, that Culduff has

presented L'Estrange to a living. It's not in a hunting county, so that he will not be exposed to temptation; nor are there any idle young men, and Julia may also enjoy security. Do you know where they are?'"

They laughed long and heartily over this postscript. Indeed, it amused them to such a degree that they forgot all the preceding part of the letter. As to the fact of the presentation, none believed it. Read by the light of Cutbill's former letter, it was plain enough that it was only one of those pious frauds which diplomacy deals in as largely as Popery. Marion, they were sure, supposed she was recording a fact; but her comments on the fact were what amused them most.

"I wonder am I a flirt?" said Julia, gravely.

"I wonder am I a vicar?" said George; and once more the laughter broke out fresh and hearty.

"Let us have Cutbill now, Nelly. It will be in a different strain. He's lengthy, too. He not only writes on four, but six sides of note paper this time."

"'Dear Bramleigh,—You will be astonished to hear that I travelled back to England with Count Pracontal or Pracontal de Bramleigh, or whatever his name be—a right good fellow, frank, straightforward, and, so far as I see, honest. We hit it off wonderfully together, and became such good friends that I took him down to my little crib at Bayswater,—an attention, I suspect, not ill timed, as he does not seem flush of money. He told me the whole story of his claim, and the way he came first to know that he had a claim. It was all discovered by a book, a sort of manuscript journal of his great grandfather's, every entry of which he, Pracontal, believes to be true as the Bible. He does not remember ever to have seen his father, though he may have done so before he was put to the Naval School at Genoa. Of his mother, he knows nothing. From all I have seen of him, I'd say that you and he have only to meet to become warm and attached friends; and it's a thousand pities you should leave to law and lawyers what a little forbearance, and a little patience, and a disposition to behave generously on each side might have settled at once and for ever.

"'In this journal that I mentioned there were two pages gummed together, by accident or design, and on one of these was a sketch of a female figure in a great wreath of

flowers, standing on a sort of pedestal, on which was written,—"Behind this stone I have deposited books or documents." I'm not sure of the exact words, for they were in Italian, and it was all I could do to master the meaning of the inscription. Now, Pracontal was so convinced that these papers have some great bearing on his claim, that he asked me to write to you to beg permission to make a search for them under the painting at Castello, of which this rough sketch is evidently a study. I own to you I feel little of that confidence that he reposes in this matter. I do not believe in the existence of the papers, nor see how, if there were any, that they could be of consequence. But his mind was so full of it, and he was so persistent in saying, "If I thought this old journal could mislead me, I'd cease to believe my right to be as good as I now regard it," that I thought I could not do better, in your interest, than to take him with me to Sedley's, to see what that shrewd old fox would say to him. P. agreed at once to go; and, what pleased me much, never thought of communicating with his lawyer nor asking his advice on the step.

"'Though I took the precaution to call on Sedley, and tell him what sort of man P. was, and how prudent it would be to hear him with a show of frankness and cordiality, that hard old dog was as stern and as unbending as if he was dealing with a housebreaker. He said he had no instructions from you to make this concession; that, though he himself attached not the slightest importance to any paper that might be found, were he to be consulted, he would unquestionably refuse this permission; that Mr. Bramleigh knew his rights too well to be disposed to encourage persons in frivolous litigation; and that the coming trial would scatter these absurd pretensions to the winds, and convince M. Pracontal and his friends that it would be better to address himself seriously to the business of life than pass his existence in prosecuting a hopeless and impossible claim.

"'I was much provoked at the sort of lecturing tone the old man assumed, and struck with astonishment at the good temper and good breeding with which the other took it. Only once he showed a slight touch of resentment, when he said, "Have a care, sir, that, while disparaging my pretensions, you suffer nothing to escape you that shall reflect on the honour of those who belong to me. I will overlook everything that relates to *me*. I will pardon nothing that insults *their* memory." This finished the interview, and we took our leave. "We have not

gained much by this step," said Pracontal, laughing, as we left the house. "Will you now consent to write to Mr. Bramleigh, for I don't believe he would refuse my request?" I told him I would take a night to think over it, and on the same evening came a telegram from Ireland to say that some strange discoveries were just being made in the Lisconnor mine; that a most valuable "lode" had been artificially closed up, and that a great fraud had been practised to depreciate the value of the mine, and throw it into the market as a damaged concern, while its real worth was considerable. They desired me to go over at once and report, and Pracontal, knowing that I should be only a few miles from Bishop's Folly, to which he clings with an attachment almost incredible, determined to accompany me.

"'I have no means of even guessing how long I may be detained in Ireland—possibly some weeks; at all events let me have a line to say you will give me this permission. I say, "give *me*" because I shall strictly confine the investigation to the limits I myself think requisite, and in reality use the search as one means of testing what importance may attach to this journal, on which Pracontal relies so implicitly; and in the event of the failure—that I foresee and would risk a bet upon—I would employ the disappointment as a useful agent in dissuading Pracontal from farther pursuit.

"'I strongly urge you, therefore, not to withhold this permission. It seems rash to say that a man ought to furnish his antagonist with a weapon to fight him; but you have always declared you want nothing but an honest, fair contest, wherein the best man should win. You have also said to me that you often doubted your own actual sincerity. You can test it now, and by a touchstone that cannot deceive. If you say to Pracontal, "There's the key, go in freely; there is nothing to hide—nothing to fear," you will do more to strengthen the ground you stand on than by all the eloquence of your lawyer; and if I know anything of this Frenchman, he is not the man to make an ill requital to such a generous confidence. Whatever you decide on, reply at once. I have no time for more, but will take my letter with me and add a line when I reach Ireland.

"'Lisconnor, Friday Night.

"'They were quite right; there was a most audacious fraud concocted, and a few days will enable me to expose it thoroughly. I'm glad Lord Culduff had nothing to say to it,

but more for your sake than his. The L'Estranges are safe; they'll have every shilling of their money, and with a premium, too.'"

Nelly laid down the letter and looked over to where George and his sister sat, still and motionless. It was a moment of deep feeling and intense relief, but none could utter a word. At last Julia said,—

"What a deal of kindness there is in that man, and how hard we felt it to believe it, just because he was vulgar. I declare I believe we must be more vulgar still to attach so much to form and so little to fact."

"There is but one line more," said Nelly, turning over the page.

"'Pracontal has lost all his spirits. He has been over to see a place belonging to a Mr. Longworth here, and has come back so sad and depressed as though the visit had renewed some great sorrow. We have not gone to Bishop's Folly yet, but mean to drive over there to-morrow. Once more, write to me.

"'Yours ever,

"'T. Cutbill.'"

"I shall not give this permission," said Bramleigh, thoughtfully. "Sedley's opinion is decidedly adverse, and I shall abide by it."

Now, though he said these words with an air of apparent determination, he spoke in reality to provoke discussion and hear what others might say. None, however, spoke, and he waited some minutes.

"I wish you would say if you agree with me," cried he at last.

"I suspect very few would give the permission," said Julia, "but that you are one of that few I believe also."

"Yes, Gusty," said Nelly. "Refuse it, and what becomes of that fair spirit in which you have so often said you desired to meet this issue?"

"What does George say?" asked Bramleigh. "Let's hear the Church."

"Well," said L'Estrange, in that hesitating, uncertain way he usually spoke in, "if a man were to say to me, 'I think I gave you a sovereign too much in change just now. Will you search your purse, and see if I'm not right?' I suppose I'd do so."

"And of course you mean that if the restitution rose to giving back some thousands a year, it would be all the same?" said Julia.

"It would be harder to do, perhaps—of course; I mean—but I hope I could do it."

"And *I*," said Bramleigh, in a tone that vibrated with feeling, "*I* hoped a few days back that no test to my honesty or my sincerity would have been too much for me—that all I asked or cared for was that the truth should prevail—I find myself now prevaricating with myself, hair-splitting, and asking have I a right to do this, that, or t'other? I declare to heaven, when a man takes refuge in that self-put question, 'Have I the right to do something that inclination tells me not to do?' he is nearer a contemptible action than he knows of. And is there not one here will say that I ought, or ought not, to refuse this request?"

"I do not suppose such a request was ever made before," said L'Estrange. "There lies the real difficulty of deciding what one should do."

"Here's a note from Mr. Sedley," cried Nelly. "Is it not possible that it may contain something that will guide us?"

"By all means read Sedley," said Bramleigh. And she opened and read:—

"'DEAR SIR,—

"'A Mr. Cutbill presented himself to me here last week, alleging he was an old and intimate friend of yours, and showing unquestionable signs of being well acquainted with your affairs. He was accompanied by M. Pracontal, and came to request permission to make searches at Castello for certain documents which he declared to be of great importance to the establishment of his claim. I will not stop to say what I thought, or indeed said, of such a proposal, exceeding in effrontery anything I had ever listened to.

"'Of course I not only refused this permission, but declared I would immediately write to you, imploring you, on no account or through any persuasion, to yield to it.

"'They left me, and apparently so disconcerted and dissuaded by my reception that I did not believe it necessary to address you on the subject. To my amazement, however, I learn from Kelson this morning that they actually did gain entrance to the house, and, by means which I have not yet ascertained, prosecuted the search they desired, and

actually discovered the church registers of Portshannon, in one page of which is the entry of the marriage of Montague Bramleigh and Enrichetta Lami, with the name of the officiating clergyman and the attendant witnesses. Kelson forwards me a copy of this, while inviting me to inspect the original. My first step, however, has been to take measures to proceed against these persons for robbery; and I have sent over one of my clerks to Ireland to obtain due information as to the events that occurred, and to institute proceedings immediately. I do not believe that they committed a burglary, but it was a felonious entry all the same.

"'The important fact, however, lies in this act of registration, which, however fraudulently obtained, will be formidable evidence on a trial. You are certainly not happy in your choice of friends, if this Mr. Cutbill be one of them; but I hope no false sentiment will induce you to step between this man and his just punishment. He has done you an irreparable mischief, and by means the most shameful and inexcusable. I call the mischief irreparable, since, looking to the line of argument adopted by our leading counsel on the last trial, the case chiefly turned on the discredit that attached to this act of marriage. I cannot therefore exaggerate the mischief this discovery has brought us. You must come over at once. The delay incurred by letter-writing, and the impossibility of profiting by any new turn events may take, renders your presence here essential, and without it I declare I cannot accept any further responsibility in this case.

"'A very flippant note from Mr. Cutbill has just reached me. He narrates the fact of the discovered books, and says, "It is not too late for B. to make terms. Send for him at once, and say that Count P. has no desire to push him to the wall." It is very hard to stomach this man's impertinence, but I hesitate now as to what course to take regarding him. Let me hear by telegraph that you are coming over: for I repeat that I will not engage myself to assume the full responsibility of the case, or take any decisive step without your sanction.'"

"What could Cutbill mean by such conduct?" cried Nelly. "Do you understand it at all, Gusty?" Bramleigh merely shook his head in token of negative.

"It all came of the man's meddlesome disposition," said Julia. "The mischievous people of the world are not the

malevolent—*they* only do harm with an object: but the meddling creatures are at it day and night, scattering seeds of trouble out of very idleness."

"Ju's right," said George; but in such a tone of habitual approval that set all the rest laughing.

"I need not discuss the question of permitting the search," said Bramleigh; "these gentlemen have saved me *that*. The only point now open is, shall I go over to England or not?"

"Go by all means," said Julia, eagerly. "Mr. Sedley's advice cannot be gainsayed."

"But it seems to me our case is lost," said he, as his eyes turned to Nelly, whose face expressed deep sorrow.

"I fear so," said she, in a faint whisper.

"Then why ask me to leave this, and throw myself into a hopeless contest? Why am I to quit this spot, where I have found peace and contentment, to encounter the struggle that, even with all my conviction of failure, will still move me to hope and expectancy?"

"Just because a brave soldier fights even after defeat seems certain," said Julia. "More than one battle has been won from those who had already despatched news of their victory."

"You may laugh at me, if you like," said L'Estrange, "but Julia is right there." And they did laugh, and the laughter was so far good that it relieved the terrible tension of their nerves, and rallied them back to ease and quietude.

"I see," said Bramleigh, "that you all think I ought to go over to England; and though none of you can know what it will cost me in feeling, I will go."

"There's a messenger from the Podestà of Cattaro waiting all this time, Gusty, to know about this English sailor they have arrested. The authorities desire to learn if you will take him off their hands."

"George is my vice-consul. He shall deal with him," said Bramleigh, laughing, "for as the steamer touches at two o'clock, I shall be run sharp to catch her. If any one will help me to pack, I'll be more than grateful."

"We'll do it in a committee of the whole house," said Julia, "for when a man's trunk is once corded he never goes back of his journey."

CHAPTER LV.

THE PRISONER AT CATTARO.

So much occupied and interested were the little household of the villa in Bramleigh's departure—there were so many things to be done, so many things to be remembered—that L'Estrange never once thought of the messenger from the Podestà, who still waited patiently for his answer.

"I declare," said Julia, "that poor man is still standing in the hall. For pity's sake, George, give him some answer, and send him away."

"But what is the answer to be, Ju? I have not the faintest notion of how these cases are dealt with."

"Let us look over what that great book of instructions says. I used to read a little of it every day when we came first, and I worried Mr. Bramleigh so completely with my superior knowledge that he carried it off and hid it."

"Oh, I remember now. He told me he had left it at the consulate, for that you were positively driving him distracted with official details.

"How ungrateful men are! They never know what good 'nagging' does them. It is the stimulant that converts half the sluggish people in the world into reasonably active individuals."

"Perhaps we are occasionally over-stimulated," said George, dryly.

"If so, it is by your own vanity. Men are spoiled by their fellow-men, and not by women. There, now, you look very much puzzled at that paradox—as you'd like to call it—but go away and think over it, and say this evening if I'm not right."

"Very likely you are," said he, in his indolent way; "but whether or not, you always beat me in a discussion."

"And this letter from the Podestà; who is to reply, or what is the reply to be?"

"Well," said he, after a pause, "I think of the two I'd rather speak bad Italian than write it. I'll go down and see the Podestà."

"There's zeal and activity," said Julia, laughing. "Never disparage the system of nagging after that. Poor George," said she as she looked after him while he set out for Cattaro, "he'd have a stouter heart to ride at a six-foot wall than for the interview that is now before him."

"And yet," said Nelly, "it was only a moment ago you were talking to him about his vanity."

"And I might as well have talked about his wealth. But you'd spoil him, Nelly, if I wasn't here to prevent it. These indolent men get into the way of believing that languor and laziness are good temper; and as George is really a fine-hearted fellow, I'm angry when he falls back upon his lethargy for his character, instead of trusting, as he could and as he ought, to his good qualities."

Nelly blushed, but it was with pleasure. This praise of one she liked—liked even better than she herself knew—was intense enjoyment to her.

Let us now turn to L'Estrange, who strolled along towards Cattaro—now stopping to gather the wild anemones which, in every splendid variety of colour, decked the sward—now loitering to gaze at the blue sea, which lay still and motionless at his feet. There was that voluptuous sense of languor in the silence—the loaded perfume of the air—the drowsy hum of insect life—the faint plash with which the sea, unstirred by wind, washed the shore—that harmonized to perfection with his own nature; and could he but have had Nelly at his side to taste the happiness with him, he would have deemed it exquisite, for, poor fellow, he was in love after his fashion. It was not an ardent impulsive passion, but it consumed him slowly and certainly, all the same. He knew well that his present life of indolence and inactivity could not, ought not, to continue—that without some prompt effort on his part his means of subsistence would be soon exhausted; but as the sleeper begs that he may be left to slumber on, and catch up, if he may, the dream that has just been broken, he seemed to entreat of fate a little longer of the delicious trance in which he now was living. His failures in life had deepened in him that sense of humility which in coarse natures turns to misanthropy, but in men of finer mould makes them gentle, and submissive, and impressionable. His own humble opinion of himself deprived him of all hope of winning Nelly's affection, but he saw—or he thought he saw—in her that love of simple pleasures and of a life removed from all ambitions, that led him to believe she would

not regard his pretensions with disdain. And then he felt that, thrown together into that closer intimacy their poverty had brought about, he had maintained towards her a studious deference and respect which had amounted almost to coldness, for he dreaded that she should think he would have adventured, in their fallen fortunes, on what he would never have dared in their high and palmy days.

"Well," said he, aloud, as he looked at the small fragment of an almost finished cigar, "I suppose it is nigh over now! I shall have to go and seek my fortune in Queensland, or New Zealand, or some far-away country, and all I shall carry with me will be the memory of this dream—for it is a dream—of our life here. I wonder shall I ever, as I have seen other men, throw myself into my work, and efface the thought of myself, and of my own poor weak nature, in the higher interests that will press on me for action."

What should he do if men came to him for guidance, or counsel, or consolation. Could he play the hypocrite, and pretend to give what he had not got? or tell them to trust to what he bitterly knew was not the sustaining principle of his own life? "This shall be so no longer," cried he; "if I cannot go heart and soul into my work, I'll turn farmer or fisherman. I'll be what I can be without shame and self-reproach. One week more of this happiness—one week—and I vow to tear myself from it for ever."

As he thus muttered, he found himself in the narrow street that led into the centre of the little town, which, blocked up by fruit-stalls and fish-baskets, required all his address to navigate. The whole population, too, were screaming out their wares in the shrill cries of the South, and invitations to buy were blended with droll sarcasms on rival productions and jeering comments on the neighbours. Though full of deference for the unmistakable signs of gentleman in his appearance, they did not the less direct their appeals to him as he passed, and the flatteries on his handsome face and graceful figure mingled with the praises of whatever they had to sell.

Half amused, but not a little flurried by all the noise and tumult around him, L'Estrange made his way through the crowd till he reached the dingy entrance which led to the still dingier stair of the Podestà's residence.

L'Estrange had scarcely prepared the speech in which he should announce himself as charged with consular functions, when he found himself in presence of a very dirty little man,

with spectacles and a skull-cap, whose profuse civilities and ceremonious courtesies actually overwhelmed him. He assured L'Estrange that there were no words in Italian—nor even in German, for he spoke in both—which could express a fractional part of the affliction he experienced in enforcing measures that savoured of severity on a subject of that great nation which had so long been the faithful friend and ally of the imperial house. On this happy political union it was clear he had prepared himself historically, for he gave a rapid sketch of the first empire, and briefly threw off a spirited description of the disastrous consequences of the connection with France, and the passing estrangement from Great Britain. By this time, what between the difficulties of a foreign tongue, and a period with which the poor parson was not, historically, over conversant, he was completely mystified and bewildered. At last the great functionary condescended to become practical. He proceeded to narrate that an English sailor, who had been landed at Ragusa by some Greek coasting-vessel, had come over on foot to Cattaro to find his consul as a means of obtaining assistance to reach England. There were, however, suspicious circumstances about the man that warranted the police in arresting him and carrying him off to prison. First of all, he was very poor, almost in rags, and emaciated to a degree little short of starvation. These were signs that vouched little for a man's character; indeed, the Podestà thought them damaging in the last degree; but there were others still worse. There were marks on his wrists and ankles which showed he had lately worn manacles and fetters—unmistakable marks: marks which the practised eye of gendarmes had declared must have been produced by the heavy chains worn by galley-slaves, so that the man was, without doubt, an escaped convict, and might be, in consequence, a very dangerous individual.

As the prisoner spoke neither Italian nor German there was no means of interrogating him. They had therefore limited themselves to taking him into custody, and now held him at the disposal of the consular authority, to deal with him as it might please.

"May I see him?" asked L'Estrange.

"By all means; he is here. We have had him brought from the prison awaiting your Excellency's arrival. Perhaps you would like to have him handcuffed before he is introduced. The brigadier recommends it."

"No, no. If the poor creature be in the condition you tell

me, he cannot be dangerous." And the stalwart curate threw a downward look at his own brawny proportions with a satisfied smile that did not show much fear.

The brigadier whispered something in the Podestà's ear in a low tone, and the great man then said aloud—"He tells me that he could slip the handcuffs on him now quite easily, for the prisoner is sound asleep, and so overcome by fatigue that he hears nothing."

"No, no," reiterated L'Estrange. "Let us have no handcuffs; and with your good permission, too, I would ask another favour: let the poor fellow take his sleep out. It will be quite time enough for me to see him when he awakes."

The Podestà turned a look of mingled wonder and pity on the man who could show such palpable weakness in official life; but he evidently felt he could not risk his dignity by concurrence in such a line of conduct.

"If your Excellency," said he, "tells me it is in this wise prisoners are treated in your country I have no more to say."

"Well, well; let him be brought up," said L'Estrange, hastily, and more than ever anxious to get free of this Austrian Dogberry.

Nothing more was said on either side while the brigadier went down to bring up the prisoner. The half-darkened room, the stillness, the mournful ticking of a clock that made the silence more significant, all impressed L'Estrange with a mingled feeling of weariness and depression; and that strange melancholy that steals over men at times, when all the events of human life seem sad-coloured and dreary, now crept over him, when the shuffling sounds of feet, and the clanging of a heavy sabre, apprised him that the escort was approaching.

"We have no treaty with any of the Italian Governments," said the Podestà, "for extradition; and if the man be a galley-slave, as we suspect, we throw all the responsibility of his case on you." As he spoke, the door opened, and a young man with a blue flannel shirt and linen trousers entered, freeing himself from the hands of the gendarmes with a loose shake, as though to say, "In presence of my countrymen in authority, I owe no submission to these." He leaned on the massive rail that formed a sort of barrier in the room, and with one hand pushed back the long hair that fell heavily over his face.

"What account do you give of yourself, my man?" said L'Estrange, in a tone half-commanding, half-encouraging.

"I have come here to ask my consul to send me on to England, or to some seaport where I may find a British vessel," said the man, and his voice was husky and weak, like that of one just out of illness.

"How did you come to these parts?" asked L'Estrange.

"I was picked up at sea by a Greek trabaccolo, and landed at Antivari; the rest of the way I came on foot."

"Were you cast away? or how came it that you were picked up?"

"I made my escape from the Bagni at Ischia. I had been a galley-slave there." The bold effrontery of the declaration was made still more startling by a sort of low laugh which followed his words.

"You seem to think it a light matter to have been at the galleys, my friend," said L'Estrange, half reprovingly. "How did it happen that an Englishman should be in such a discreditable position?"

"It's a long story—too long for a hungry man to tell," said the sailor; "perhaps too long for your own patience to listen to. At all events, it has no bearing on my present condition."

"I'm not so sure of that, my good fellow. Men are seldom sentenced to the galleys for light offences; and I'd like to know something of the man I'm called on to befriend."

"I make you the same answer I gave before—the story would take more time than I have well strength for. Do you know," said he, earnestly, and in a voice of touching significance, "it is twenty-eight hours since I have tasted food?"

L'Estrange leaned forward in his chair, like one expecting to hear more, and eager to catch the words aright; and then rising, walked over to the rail where the prisoner stood. "You have not told me your name," said he, in a voice of kindly meaning.

"I have been called Sam Rogers for some time back; and I mean to be Sam Rogers a little longer."

"But it is not your real name?" asked L'Estrange, eagerly.

The other made no reply for some seconds; and then, moving his hand carelessly through his hair, said, in a half-reckless way, "I declare, sir, I can't see what you have to do with my name, whether I be Sam Rogers, or—or—anything else I choose to call myself. To you—I believe, at least—to you I am simply a distressed British sailor."

"And you are Jack Bramleigh?" said L'Estrange, in a

low tone, scarcely above a whisper, while he grasped the sailor's hands, and shook them warmly.

"And who are you?" said Jack, in a voice shaken and faltering.

"Don't you know me, my poor dear fellow? Don't you remember George L'Estrange?"

What between emotion and debility, this speech unmanned him so that he staggered back a couple of paces, and sank down heavily, not fainting, but too weak to stand, too much overcome to utter.

CHAPTER LVI.

AT LADY AUGUSTA'S.

"THE Count Pracontal, my lady," said a very grave-looking groom of the chambers, as Lady Augusta sat watching a small golden squirrel swinging by his tail from the branch of a camellia tree.

"Say I am engaged, Hislop—particularly engaged. I do not receive—or, wait; tell him I am much occupied, but if he is quite sure his visit shall not exceed five minutes, he may come in."

Count Pracontal seemed as though the permission had reached his own ears, for he entered almost immediately, and, bowing deeply and deferentially, appeared to wait leave to advance further into the room.

"Let me have my chocolate, Hislop;" and, as the man withdrew, she pointed to a chair, and said, "There. When did you come back?"

Pracontal, however, had dropped on his knee before her, and pressed her hand to his lips with a fervid devotion, saying, "How I have longed and waited for this moment."

"I shall ring the bell, sir, if you do not be seated immediately. I asked when you returned?"

"An hour ago, my lady—less than an hour ago. I did not dare to write; and then I wished to be myself the bearer of my own good news."

"What good news are these?"

"That I have, if not won my suit, secured the victory.

The registries have been discovered—found in the very spot indicated in the journal. The entries are complete; and nothing is wanting to establish the legality of the marriage. Oh, I entreat you, do not listen to me so coldly. You know well for what reason I prize this success. You know well what gives its brightest lustre in my eyes."

"Pray be narrative now—the emotional can be kept for some other time. Who says that this means success?"

"My lawyer, Mr. Kelson. He calls the suit won. He proves his belief, for he has advanced me money to pay off my debt to Longworth, and to place me in a position of ease and comfort."

"And what is Kelson; is he one of the judges?"

"Of course not. He is one of the leading solicitors of London; a very grave, thoughtful, cautious man. I have shown you many of his letters. You must remember him."

"No; I never remember people; that is, if they have not personally interested me. I think you have grown thin. You look as if you had been ill."

"I have fretted a good deal—worried myself; and my anxiety about you has made me sleepless and feverish."

"About *me!* Why, I was never better in my life."

"Your looks say as much: but I meant my anxiety to lay my tidings at your feet, and with them myself and my whole future."

"You may leave the chocolate there, Hislop," as the man entered with the tray; "unless Count Pracontal would like some."

"Thanks, my lady," said he, bowing his refusal.

"You are wrong then," said she, as the servant withdrew, "Hislop makes it with the slightest imaginable flavour of the cherry laurel; and it is most soothing. Isn't he a love?"

"Hislop?"

"No, my darling squirrel yonder. The poor dear has been ill these two days. He bit Sir Marcus Cluff, and that horrid creature seems to have disagreed with the darling, for he has pined ever since. Don't caress him—he hates men, except Monsignore Alberti, whom, probably, he mistakes for an old lady. And what becomes of all the Bramleighs—are they left penniless?"

"By no means. I do not intend to press my claim farther than the right to the estates. I am not going to proceed for—I forget the legal word—the accumulated profits. Indeed, if Mr. Bramleigh be only animated by the spirit I

have heard attributed to him, there is no concession that I am not disposed to make him."

"What droll people Frenchmen are! They dash their morality, like their cookery, with something discrepant. They fancy it means 'piquancy.' What, in the name of all romance, have you to do with the Bramleighs? Why all this magnanimity for people who certainly have been keeping you out of what was your own, and treating your claim to it as a knavery?"

"You might please to remember that we are related."

"Of course you are nothing of the kind. If *you* be the true prince, the others must be all illegitimate a couple of generations back. Perhaps I am embittered against them by that cruel fraud practised on myself. I cannot bring myself to forgive it. Now, if you really were that fine generous creature you want me to believe, it is of *me*, of *me*, Lady Augusta Bramleigh, you would be thinking all this while: how to secure *me* that miserable pittance they called my settlement; how to recompense *me* for the fatal mistake I made in my marriage; how to distinguish between the persons who fraudulently took possession of your property, and the poor harmless victim of their false pretensions."

"And is not this what I am here for? Is it not to lay my whole fortune at your feet?"

"A very pretty phrase, that doesn't mean anything like what it pretends; a phrase borrowed from a vaudeville, and that ought to be restored to where it came from."

"Lord and Lady Culduff, my lady, wish to pay their respects."

"They are passing through," said Lady Augusta, reading the words written in pencil on the card presented by the servant. "Of course I must see them. You needn't go away, Count; but I shall not present you. Yes, Hislop, tell her ladyship I am at home. I declare you are always compromising me. Sit over yonder, and read your newspaper, or play with Felice."

She had barely finished these instructions when the double door was flung wide, and Marion swept proudly in. Her air and toilette were both queenlike, and, indeed, her beauty was not less striking than either. Lord Culduff followed, a soft pleasant smile on his face. It might do service in many ways, for it was equally ready to mean sweetness or sarcasm, as occasion called for.

When the ladies had kissed twice, and his lordship had

saluted Lady Augusta with a profound respect, dashed with a sort of devotion, Marion's eyes glanced at the stranger, who, though he arose, and only reseated himself as they sat down, neither lifted his glance nor seemed to notice them further.

"We are only going through; we start at two o'clock," said she, hurriedly.

"At one-forty, my lady," said Lord Culduff, with a faint smile, as though shocked at being obliged to correct her.

"It was so kind of you to come," said Lady Augusta; "and you only arrived this morning?"

"We only arrived half an hour ago."

"I must order you some lunch; I'm sure you can eat something."

"My lady is hungry; she said so as we came along," said Lord Culduff, "allow me to ring for you. As for myself, I take Liebig's lozenges and a spoonful of Curaçoa—nothing else—before dinner."

"It's so pleasant to live with people who are 'dieted,'" said Marion, with a sneering emphasis on the word.

"So, I hear from Bramleigh," interposed Lord Culduff, "that this man—I forget his name—actually broke into the house at Castello, and carried away a quantity of papers."

"My lord, as your lordship is so palpably referring to me, and as I am quite sure you are not aware of my identity, may I hasten to say I am Count Pracontal de Bramleigh?"

"Oh, dear! have I forgotten to present you?" said Lady Augusta, with a perfect simplicity of manner.

Marion acknowledged the introduction by the slightest imaginable bow and a look of cold defiance; while Lord Culduff smiled blandly, and professed his regret if he had uttered a word that could occasion pain.

"Love and war are chartered libertines, and why not law?" said the Viscount. "I take it that all stratagems are available: the great thing is, they should be successful."

"Count Pracontal declares that he can pledge himself to the result," said Lady Augusta. "The case, in fact, as he represents it, is as good as determined."

"Has a jury decided, then?" asked Culduff.

"No, my lord; the trial comes on next term. I only repeat the assurance given me by my lawyer; and so far confirmed by him that he has made me large advances, which he well knows I could not repay if I should not gain my cause."

"These are usually cautious people," said the Viscount, gravely.

"It strikes me," said Marion, rising, "that this sort of desultory conversation on a matter of such importance is, to say the least, inconvenient. Even the presence of this gentleman is not sufficient to make me forget that my family have always regarded his pretension as something not very far from a fraud."

"I regret infinitely, madam," said Pracontal, bowing low, "that it is not a man has uttered the words just spoken."

"Lady Culduff's words, sir, are all mine," said Lord Culduff.

"I thank your lordship from my heart for the relief you have afforded me."

"There must be nothing of this kind," said Lady Augusta, warmly. "If I have been remiss in not making Count Pracontal known to you before, let me repair my error by presenting him now as a gentleman who makes me the offer of his hand."

"I wish you good morning," said Marion. "No, thank you; no luncheon. Your ladyship has given me fully as much for digestion as I care for. Good bye."

"If my congratulations could only shadow forth a vision of all the happiness I wish your ladyship," began Lord Culduff.

"I think I know, my lord, what you would say," broke she in, laughingly. "You would like to have uttered something very neat on well-assorted unions. There could be no better authority on such a subject; but Count Pracontal is toleration itself: he lets me tell my friends that I am about to marry him for money, just as I married poor Colonel Bramleigh for love."

"I am waiting for you, my lord. We have already trespassed too far on her ladyship's time and occupations." The sneering emphasis on the last word was most distinct. Lord Culduff kissed Lady Augusta's hand with a most devoted show of respect, and slowly retired.

As the door closed after them, Pracontal fell at her feet, and covered her hand with kisses.

"There, there, Count; I have paid a high price for that piece of impertinence I have just uttered; but when I said it, I thought it would have given her an apoplexy."

"But you are mine—you are my own!"

"*Nous en parlerons.* The papers are full of breaches of

promise; and if you want me to keep mine, you'll not make it odious to me by tormenting me about it."

"But, my lady, I have a heart; a heart that would be broken by a betrayal."

"What a strange heart for a Frenchman! About as suitable to the Boulevards Italiens as snow shoes to the tropics. Monsieur de Pracontal," said she, in a much graver tone, "please to bear in mind that *I* am a very considerable item in such an arrangement as we spoke of. The *whole* question is not what would make *you* happy."

Pracontal bowed low in silence; his gesture seemed to accept her words as a command to be obeyed, and he did not utter a syllable.

"Isn't she handsome?" cried she, at length. "I declare, Count, if one of your countrywomen had a single one of the charms of that beautiful face she'd be turning half the heads in Europe; and Marion can do nothing with them all, except drive other women wild with envy."

CHAPTER LVII.

AT THE INN AT CATTARO.

When L'Estrange had carried off Jack Bramleigh to the inn, and had seen him engaged with an excellent breakfast, he despatched a messenger to the villa to say that he was not to be expected home by dinner time, but would be back to tea "with a friend," for whom he begged Gusty Bramleigh's room might be prepared.

I shall not delay to chronicle all the doubt, the discussion, and the guessing that the note occasioned; the mere fact that George had ventured to issue an order of this kind without first consulting Julia investing the step with a degree of mysteriousness perfectly inscrutable. I turn, however, to Cattaro, where L'Estrange and Jack sat together, each so eager to hear the other's tidings as to be almost too impatient to dwell upon himself.

To account for their presence in this remote spot, George, as briefly as he could, sketched the course of events at Castello, not failing to lay due stress on the noble and courageous spirit with which Augustus and Nelly had met misfortune. "All is not lost yet," said L'Estrange; "far from it; but even if the worst should come, I do not know of two people in the world who will show a stouter front to adversity."

"And your sister, where is she?" said Jack, in a voice scarce above a whisper.

"Here—at the villa."

"Not married?"

"No. I believe she has changed less than any of us. She is just what you remember her."

It was not often that L'Estrange attempted anything like adroitness in expression, but he did so here, and saw, in the heightened colour and sparkling eye of the other, how thoroughly his speech had succeeded.

"I wonder will she know me," said Jack, after a pause. "*You* certainly did not at first."

"Nor, for that matter, did *you* recognize *me*."

"Ah, but I did though," said Jack, passing his hand over his brow, "but I had gone through so much, and my head was so knocked about, I couldn't trust that my senses were not deceiving me, and I thought if I make any egregious blunder now, these people will set me down for mad. That was the state I was in the whole time you were questioning me. I promise you it was no small suffering while it lasted."

"My poor fellow, what trials you must have gone through to come to this. Tell me by what mischance you were at Ischia."

With all a sailor's frankness, and with a modesty in speaking of his own achievements just as sailor-like, Jack told the story of the storm at Naples.

"I had no thought of breaking the laws," said he, bluntly. "I saw ships foundering, and small craft turning keel uppermost on every side of me; there was disaster and confusion everywhere. I had no time to inquire about the morals of the men I saw clinging to hencoops or holding on by stretchers. I saved as many as I could, and sorry enough I was to have seen many go down before I could get near them; and I was fairly beat when it was all over, or perhaps they'd not have captured me so easily. At all events," said he, after a minute's silence, "they might have let me off with a lighter sentence, but my temper got the better of me in court, and when they asked me if it was not true that I had made greater efforts to save the galley-slaves than the soldiery, I told them it might have been so, for the prisoners, chained and handcuffed as they were, went down like brave men, while the royal troops yelled and screamed like a set of arrant cowards, and that whenever I pulled one of the wretches out of the water I was half ashamed of my own humanity. That speech settled me, at least the lawyer said so, and declared he was afraid to say a word more in defence of a man that insulted the tribunal and the nation together."

"And what was your sentence?"

"Death, commuted to the galleys for life; worse than any death! It's not the hardship or the labour, I mean. A sailor goes through more downright hard work on a blowy night than these fellows do in a year. It is the way a man brutalizes when vice and crime make up the whole atmosphere of his life. The devil has a man's heart all his own, whenever hope deserts it, and you want to do wickedness

just because it *is* wickedness. For three weeks before I made my escape, it was all I could do not to dash the turnkey's brains out when he made his night round. I told my comrade—the man I was chained to—what I felt, and he said, 'We all go through that at first, but when you're some years here you'll not care for that or anything.' I believe it was the terror of coming to that condition made me try to escape. I don't know that I ever felt the same ecstasy of delight that I felt as I found myself swimming in that fresh cold sea in the silence of a calm starry night. I'm sure it will be a memory that will last my lifetime. I thought of you all—I thought of long ago, of our happy evenings, and I pictured to my mind the way we used to sit around the fire, and I wondered what had become of my place: was I ever remembered? was I spoken of? could it be that at that very moment some one was asking, where was poor Jack? And how I wished you might all know that my last thoughts were upon you, that it was the dear old long ago was before me to the last. I was seventeen hours in the water. When they picked me up I was senseless from a sun-stroke, for the corks floated me long after I gave up swimming. I was so ill when I landed that I went to hospital; but there was little care given to the sick, and I left it when I was able to walk, and came on here. Talk of luck, but I ask you was there ever such a piece of fortune befell a man?"

L'Estrange could not speak as he gazed on the poor fellow, over whose worn and wasted features joy had lighted up a look of delight that imparted an almost angelic elevation to his face.

"But can I go back like this?" asked he, sorrowfully, as he looked down at his ragged clothes and broken shoes.

"I have thought of all that. There is nothing to be had here ready but Montenegrin costume, so the landlord tells me, and you will have to figure in something very picturesque."

"Cannot I get a sailor's jacket and trousers?"

"Aye, of Dalmatian cut and colour, but they'll not become you as well as that green velvet attila and the loose hose of the mountaineer. Try if you can't take a sleep now, and when you awake you'll find your new rig in that room yonder, where there's a bath ready for you. I'll go down the town meanwhile, and do a few commissions, and we will set out homewards when you're rested."

"I wish it was over," said Jack, with a sigh.

"Wish what was over?"

"I mean I wish the shock was over. The shock of seeing me such an object as I am! Sickness changes a man quite enough, but there's worse than that, George. I know what this rough life of mine must have made of me. You won't say it, old fellow, but I see it in your sad face all the same. I am—say it out, man—I am a most disreputable-looking blackguard!"

"I declare, on my honour, that, except the ravages of illness, I see no change in you whatever."

"Look here," said Jack, as his voice trembled with a peculiar agitation, "I'll see Nelly first. A man's sister can never be ashamed of him, come what will. If Nelly shows—and she's not one to hide it—that—no matter, I'll not say more about it. I see you're not pleased with me laying stress on such a matter."

"No, no, you wrong me, Jack; you wrong me altogether. My poor fellow, we never were—we never had such good reason to be proud of you as now. You are a hero, Jack. You've done what all Europe will ring with."

"Don't talk balderdash; my head is weak enough already. If you're not ashamed of the tatterdemalion that comes back to you, it's more than I deserve. There now, go off, and do your business, and don't be long, for I'm growing very impatient to see them. Give me something to smoke till you come back, and I'll try and be calm and reasonable by that time."

If L'Estrange had really anything to do in the town he forgot all about it, and trotted about from street to street, so full of Jack and his adventures that he walked into apple-stalls and kicked over egg-baskets amid the laughter and amusement of the people.

If he had told no more than the truth in saying that Jack was still like what he had been, there were about him signs of suffering and hardship that gave a most painful significance to his look, and more painful than even these was the poor fellow's consciousness of his fallen condition. The sudden pauses in speaking, the deep sigh that would escape him, the almost bitter raillery he used when speaking of himself, all showed how acutely he felt his altered state.

L'Estrange was in no wise prepared for the change half an hour had made in Jack's humour. The handsome dress of Montenegro became him admirably, and the sailor-like

freedom of his movements went well with the easy costume. "Isn't this a most appropriate transformation, George?" he cried out. "I came in here looking like a pickpocket, and I go out like a stage bandit!"

"I declare it becomes you wonderfully. I'll wager the girls will not let you wear any other dress."

"Ay, but my toilet is not yet completed. See what a gorgeous scarf I have got here—green and gold, and with a gold fringe that will reach to my boots, and the landlord insists on lending me his own silver-mounted sabre. I say, old fellow, have you courage to go through the town with me?"

"You forget you are in the last fashion of the place; if they stare at you now, it will be approvingly."

"What's the distance? Are we to walk?"

"Walk or drive, as you like best. On foot we can do it in an hour."

"On foot be it then; for though I am very impatient to see them, I have much to ask you about."

As they issued from the inn, it was, as L'Estrange surmised, to meet a most respectful reception from the townsfolk, who regarded Jack as a mountaineer chief of rank and station. They uncovered and made way for him as he passed, and from the women especially came words of flattering admiration at his handsome looks and gallant bearing.

"Are they commenting on the ass in the lion's skin?" said Jack, in a sly whisper; "is that what they are muttering to each other?"

"Quite the reverse. It is all in extravagant praise of you. The police are on the alert, too: they think there must be mischief brewing in the mountains, that has brought a great chief down to Cattaro."

Thus chatting and laughing, they gained the outskirts of the town, and soon found themselves on one of the rural paths which led up the mountain.

"Don't think me very stupid, George, or very tiresome," said Jack, "if I ask you to go over again what you told me this morning. Such strange things have befallen me of late that I can scarcely distinguish between fact and fancy. Now, first of all, have we lost Castello—and who owns it?"

"No. The question is yet to be decided; the trial will take place in about two months."

"And if we are beaten, does it mean that we are ruined? Does it sweep away Marion and Nelly's fortunes, too?"

"I fear so. I know little accurately, but I believe the whole estate is involved in the claim."

"Gusty bears it well, you say?"

"Admirably. I never saw a man behave with such splendid courage."

"I'll not ask about Nelly, for I could swear for *her* pluck. She was always the best of us."

If L'Estrange drank in this praise with ecstacy, he had to turn away his head, lest the sudden flush that covered his face should be observed.

"I have no wish to hear the story of this claim now; you shall tell it to me some other time. But just tell me, was it ever heard of in my father's time?"

"I believe so. Your father knew of it, but did not deem it serious."

"Marion, of course, despises it still; and what does Temple say?"

"One scarcely knows. I don't think they have had a letter from him since they left Ireland."

"See what a wise fellow I was!" cried he, laughing. "I sank so low in life, that any change must be elevation. You are all great folks to *me!*"

There was a long and painful pause after this—each deep in his own thoughts. At last Jack asked suddenly, "How is Marion? Is she happy in her marriage?"

"We hear next to nothing of her; the newspapers tell us of her being at great houses and in fine company, but we know no more."

"Of course she's happy then. When she was a child, she would only play with us if we made her a queen; and though we often tried to rebel—we were great levellers in our way—she always kept us down, and whether we liked it or not, we had to admit the sovereignty."

"Your younger sister"—he did not call her Nelly—"was not of this mould?"

"Not a bit of it; she was the peace-maker, always on the side of the weak, and though she was a delicate child, she'd fight against oppression with the passion of a tigress. Wasn't it strange?" said he, after a pause. "There we were, five of us, treated and reared exactly alike; in early life certainly there were no distinctions made, nor any favouritism practised. We were of the same race and blood, and yet no two of us were alike. Temple had perhaps some sort of resemblance to Marion, but he had not her bold daring spirit. Where *she*

was courageous, *he'd* have been crafty. Whatever good there was amongst us, Nelly had it."

Another and longer pause now succeeded. "I say, George," cried Jack at last, "how do you mean to break it to the girls that I'm here? I take it, poor Nelly's nerves must have suffered sorely of late. Is she likely to stand a shock without injury?"

"It is exactly what I'm trying to resolve this moment. Flushed with the walk, and cheered by the fresh air, you don't look sickly now."

"Ah, my dear fellow, that's not the worst of it. It is the sight of me as recalling my fallen fortune—that's what I fear for her; her last good bye to me was blended with joy at my promotion—I was going to take up my command! She has never seen me since my disgrace."

"Don't call it that, Jack; we all know there is no other blame attaches to you than rashness."

"When rashness can make a man forget his condition, it's bad enough; but I'll not go back to these things. Tell me how I am to meet her."

"Perhaps it would be best I should first see Julia, and tell her you are here. I always like to ask her advice."

"I know that of old," said Jack, with a faint smile.

"I'll leave you in the summer-house at the end of the garden there, till I speak with Julia."

"Not very long, I hope."

"Not an instant; she never requires a minute to decide on what to do: follow me now along this path, and I'll place you in your ambush. You'll not leave it till I come."

"What a lovely spot this seems, it beats Castello hollow!"

"So we say every day. We all declare we'd like to pass our lives here."

"Let me be one of the party, and I'll say nothing against the project," said Jack, as he brushed through a hedge of sweet briar, and descended a little slope, at the foot of which a shady summer-house stood guardian over a well. "Remember now," cried he, "not to tax my patience too far. I'll give you ten minutes, but I won't wait twenty."

L'Estrange lost no time in hastening back to the house. Julia, he heard, was giving orders about the room for the stranger, and he found her actively engaged in the preparation. "For whom am I taking all this trouble, George?" said she, as he entered.

"Guess, Julia, guess! Whom would you say was best worth it?"

"Not Mr. Cutbill—whom Nelly fixed on—not Sir Marcus Cluff, whose name occurred to myself, nor even the Pretender, Count Pracontal; and now I believe I have exhausted the category of possibly guests."

"Not any of these," said he, drawing her to his side. "Where is Nelly?"

"She went down to gather some roses."

"Not in the lower garden, I hope," cried he, eagerly.

"Wherever she could find the best—but why not there? and what do you mean by all this mystery?"

"Go and fetch her here at once," cried he. "If she should see him suddenly, the shock might do her great harm."

"See whom? see whom?" exclaimed she, wildly. "Don't torture me this way!"

"Jack, her brother, Jack Bramleigh," and he proceeded to tell how he had found him, and in what condition: but she heard nothing of it all, for she had sunk down on a seat and sat sobbing with her hands over her face, then suddenly wiping the tears away, she rose up, and, while her voice trembled with each word, she said, "Is he changed, George? is he greatly changed?"

"Changed! yes, for he has been ill, and gone through all manner of hardships, and now he is dressed like a Montenegro chief, for we could get no other clothes, so that you'll scarcely know him."

"Let us find Nelly at once," said she, moving towards the door. "Come George,—come," and she was down the stairs, and across the hall, and out at the door, before he could follow her. In her agitated manner, and rapid expression, it was evident she was endeavouring to subdue the deep emotion of her heart, and, by seeming to be occupied, to suppress the signs of that blended joy and sorrow which rack the nature more fatally than downright misery.

"See, George, look there!" cried she, wildly, as she pointed down a straight alley, at the top of which they were standing. "There they are. Nelly has her arm round him. They have met, and it is all over;" and so saying, she hid her face on her brother's shoulder, and sobbed heavily; meanwhile the two came slowly forward, too much engaged with each other to notice those in front of them.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE VILLA LIFE.

It is not, at this the eleventh hour of my story, I can stop to dwell on the life of the villa at Cattaro, though I am free to own it was about the sunniest bit of landscape our long journey has offered us.

Seated or lying on the grass, under the shade of a broad-leaved fig-tree, they listened to Jack's adventures, told with a quaint humour, of which they who knew him well could appreciate every shade and tint. In his days of prosperous fortune it was rare to hear him speak of himself: the routine life he led seemed to develop little or nothing of his real nature, but now, dependent as he was altogether on intrinsic qualities, for whatever estimation he might obtain, owing nothing to station, it was remarkable how his character had widened and expanded, how his sympathies with his fellow-men had increased. Though nothing could be farther from his nature than any mawkish sentimentality, there was that show of trustfulness, that degree of hopeful belief in the world at large, which occasionally led Julia to banter him on his optimism, and this, be it said passingly, was the only show of freedom between them; their manner to each other from the moment they met being marked by a studied reserve on each side.

"And surely, Prince," said she, calling him by the title which, in honour of his dress, they had given him, "surely you must have met some charming creatures at the galleys. All the good qualities of human nature were not reserved for the cockpit or the steerage, or whatever it is."

"Aye, even at the galleys they weren't all bad, though it's not exactly the sort of place men grow better in. I had a capital old fellow as comrade, and, I take shame to say, I ought to have thought of him before this. I say, George, have you any friends of influence at Naples? I wish I could get my old companion his liberty."

"George has gone in to write to Augustus," said Nelly; "but if Lord Culduff could answer your purpose, I'd ask Marion to interest him in the matter."

"There's a dear good girl, do write a line to Marion; tell her it's the greatest favour she could bestow on me. The poor fellow is a political criminal; he only shot at the king I believe, and where they do that every week or so it's hard to make it a capital offence. I'll give you his name and his number when I go into the house."

"The post leaves early," said she, rising. "I must do this at once."

"Wait till I have finished this corner of my netting and I'll go with you," said Julia.

"I say No to that," cried Jack. "I'm not going to be left alone here. If that's the way you treat a distinguished guest, the sooner he takes his leave the better. Stay where you are, Miss Julia."

"But I shall have no work, Master Jack. My net will be finished in a few minutes."

"Make cigarettes for me then. There's the bag," said he, lazily.

"I declare our Bohemianism progresses famously," said she, half tartly. "What do you think of this proposal, Nelly?" The question came late, however, for Nelly was already on her way to the house.

"Don't go, that's a good girl; don't leave me here to my own thoughts—they're not over jolly, I promise you, when I'm all alone."

"Why, it's your good spirits that amaze me," replied she. "I don't remember seeing you so cheerful or so merry long ago, as you are now."

"You mean that I wasn't so happy when I had more reason to be so? but what if I were to tell you out of what a sad heart this joy comes; how every day I say to myself, 'This is to be the last of it.' Not," said he, in a bolder voice, "that I want to think about myself; this terrible disaster that has befallen my family is infinitely worse than anything that can attach to *me*. Even yet I cannot bring myself to believe this great smash." She made no answer; and he went on: "I can't make out if Nelly herself believes it. You all wear such cheerful faces, it's not easy to understand in what spirit you take this reverse."

"I think that your return has recompensed Nelly for everything."

"She was always the best of us; it's no great praise that same; but I mean—but it's no matter what I mean, for you are laughing at me already."

"No indeed, I was not. If I smiled it was in thinking how little all your casualties have changed you."

"For that matter I suspect we may compliment or condemn each other, whichever it be, on equal terms."

"So at last I have got you to say a civil thing to me: you tell me I am the same delightful fascinating creature you knew me long ago."

"I said nothing about fascination," said he sternly.

"Not directly, of course. Your tact and delicacy were proof against such indiscretion, but you know you meant it."

"I'll tell you what I know: I know that I never saw a girl except yourself who liked to pain—aye, to torture—those who cared for her; who would infinitely rather indulge her mood of mockery than—than——"

"Pray finish. It's not every day I have the fortune to hear such candour. Tell me what it is that I postpone to my love of sarcasm?"

"I've done. I've been very rude to you, and I ask your pardon. I was not very polished in my best of days, and I take it my late schooling has not done much to improve me. When I was coming here I swore an oath to myself that, no matter what you'd say to me, I'd not lose temper, nor make a resentful answer to anything; and now I see I've forgotten all my good intentions, and the best thing I can do is to ask you to forgive me, and go my ways."

"I'm not offended," said she, calmly, without raising her eyes. "I suppose if the balance were struck between us, I did more to provoke *you* than you did to wound *me*."

"What is this I hear about being provoked and wounded?" cried Nelly, coming up to where they sat.

"Your brother and I have been quarrelling, that's all. We thought it the pleasantest way to pass the time till you came back; and we have succeeded to perfection."

"I declare, Julia, this is too bad," cried Nelly.

"But why Julia? Why am I singled out as the culprit? Is he so above reproach that he could not be in the wrong?"

"I know I was in the wrong, and I've said so, but now let Nelly be judge between us. Here is the way it began——"

"The way what began, pray?" asked Julia.

"There now, that's the way she pushes me to lose my temper, and when she sees I'm angry she grows all the calmer."

"She's downright disagreeable," said Julia; "and I don't

know why a frank, outspoken sailor condescends to speak to her."

"Well, he's pretty sure to get the worst of it," muttered he.

"Poor Jack," said Nelly, caressingly. "And for all that he likes the ill-treatment better than all the flatteries he meets elsewhere."

"That shrug of the shoulders does not say so," said Julia, laughing. "Come," cried she, with a merry voice, "let us do something more worthy of this delicious morning; let us have a walk up the mountain; we can have shade all the way."

"What's that little dome;—there above the trees?" asked Jack.

"That's the campanile of our little chapel. I'll fetch the key, and we'll go and visit it. We've not been to see it yet."

"But George would like to come with us;" and so saying, Julia hastened away to find him.

"Oh, Nelly, I love her better than ever, and she scorns me even more," said he, as he hid his head on his sister's shoulder.

"My poor dear Jack; how little you know her! You never sorrowed over your last parting as she did. We have had all of us great reverses. They, as well as ourselves; and that spirit of Julia's—there is another name for it than mockery—has carried her through her troubles better than a more pretentious philosophy."

"But she is not even friendly with me, Nelly. None of you make me feel what I have sunk to as she does."

"There again you are unjust——"

"Right or wrong I'll bear it no longer. I only wait now till Gusty comes back. I want to shake his hand once more, and then, girl, you have seen the last of me."

Before Nelly could reply, Julia and her brother had joined them

"Here's news," said George, showing a letter, "Augustus will be with us to-morrow; he only writes a few lines to say —'I have nothing particularly cheering to report, and it will all bear keeping. I mean to be at home on Wednesday next. I am all impatience to see Jack; the thought of meeting him more than repays me my reverses here. Give him my love. —A. Bramleigh.'"

"We shall have plenty to do to prepare for his arrival," said Julia: "we must postpone our visit to the chapel. Would this illustrious prince condescend to help us to move tables and chests of drawers?"

Jack threw a very significant glance towards Nelly, as though to say, "She is at the old game."

"Well sir? I wait your answer," said Julia.

"For twenty-four hours I am at your orders," said Jack.

"And then under what commander do you serve?"

"Captain Fortune, I suspect," said he, gravely. "A gentleman, or lady, perhaps, that has shown me no especial fondness up to this."

"Jack says he is going to leave us," said Nelly, as her eyes filled up.

"But why?" cried George.

"But why?" echoed Julia.

"Haven't I given proof enough," said Jack, with a faint laugh, "that I'm not what Miss Julia there calls a very logical animal: that when I get a wayward fancy in my head I follow it faithfully as if it was a strong conviction. Well, now, one of these moments has come to me; and thinking, besides, that this pleasant sort of life here is not exactly the best preparation for a rougher kind of existence, I have made up my mind to slip my cable after I've seen Gusty."

"Well, then, let us profit by the short time left us," said Julia, quietly. "Come and help me in the house. I shall want you, too, George."

"You must do without me, Julia: I have only just discovered a letter in my pocket, with the seal unbroken, that I ought to have answered at least a fortnight ago. It is from Sir Marcus Cluff," said he, in a whisper, "making me an offer of the vicarage at Hoxton."

"What a kind fellow?"

"Who's a kind fellow?" asked Jack.

"A certain gentleman, who made me the flattering proposal to become his wife and nurse, and who now offers to make George his chaplain."

"It rains good luck here," said Jack, with a half bitter smile; "why won't it drift a little in *my* direction? By the way, Nelly, what about the letter I asked you to write to Marion?"

"It is written. I only want to fill in the name of the person; you told me to keep a blank for it."

"I'll go and fetch my pocket-book," said he, and broke away at once, and hastened towards the house.

"I'm delighted at your good news, Julia," said Nelly; "though it almost breaks my heart to think how desolate we shall soon be here."

"Never anticipate evil fortune. We are still together, and let us not mar the present by glancing at a possible future."

"And poor Jack," began Nelly; but unable to finish, she turned away her head to hide the emotion she felt.

"He shall—he must stay," cried Julia.

"You know the price, dearest," said Nelly, throwing herself into her arms.

"Well, who says I am not ready to pay it? There, that's enough of folly. Let us now think of something useful."

CHAPTER LIX.

A VERY BRIEF DREAM.

Julia was seldom happier than when engaged in preparing for a coming guest. There was a blended romance and fuss about it all that she liked. She liked to employ her fancy in devising innumerable little details, she liked the active occupation itself, and she liked best of all that storied web of thought in which she connected the expected one with all that was to greet him. How he would be pleased with this, what he would think of that? Would he leave that chair or that table where she had placed it? Would he like that seat in the window, and the view down the glen, as she hoped he might? Would the new-comer, in fact, fall into the same train of thought and mind as she had who herself planned and executed all around him.

Thus thinking was it that, with the aid of a stout Dalmatian peasant-girl, she busied herself with preparations for Augustus Bramleigh's arrival. She knew all his caprices about the room he liked to occupy. How he hated much furniture, and loved space and freedom; how he liked a soft and tempered light, and that the view from his window should range over some quiet secluded bit of landscape, rather than take in what recalled life and movement and the haunts of men.

She was almost proud of the way she saw into people's natures by the small dropping preferences they evinced for this or that, and had an intense pleasure in meeting the coming fancy. At the present moment, too, she was glad to busy herself in any mode rather than dwell on the thoughts that the first interval of rest would be sure to bring before her. She saw that Jack Bramleigh was displeased with her, and, though not without some misgivings, she was vexed that he alone of all should resent the capricious moods of a temper resolutely determined to take the sunniest path in existence, and make the smaller worries of life but matter for banter.

"He mistakes me altogether," said she aloud, but speaking to herself, "if he imagines that I'm in love with poverty and all its straits; but I'm not going to cry over them for all that. They may change me in many ways. I can't help that. Want is an ugly old hag, and one cannot sit opposite her without catching a look of her features; but she'll not subdue my courage, nor make me afraid to meet her eye. Here, Gretchen, help me with this great chest of drawers. We must get rid of it out of this, wherever it goes." It was a long and weary task, and tried their strength to the last limit; and Julia threw herself into a deep-cushioned chair when it was over, and sighed heavily. "Have you a sweetheart, Gretchen?" she asked, just to lead the girl to talk, and relieve the oppression that she felt would steal over her. Yes, Gretchen had a sweetheart, and he was a fisherman, and he had a fourth share in a "bragotza;" and when he had saved enough to buy out two of his comrades he was to marry her; and Gretchen was very fond, and very hopeful, and very proud of her lover, and altogether took a very pleasant view of life, though it was all of it in expectancy. Then Gretchen asked if the signorina had not a sweetheart, and Julia, after a pause, and it was a pause in which her colour came and went, said, "No!" And Gretchen drew nigh, and stared at her with her great hazel eyes, and read in her now pale face that the "No" she had uttered had its own deep meaning; for Gretchen, though a mere peasant, humble and illiterate, was a woman, and had a woman's sensibility under all that outward ruggedness.

"Why do you look at me so, Gretchen?" asked Julia.

"Ah, signorina," sighed she, "I am sorry—I am very sorry! It is a sad thing not to be loved."

"So it is, Gretty; but every day is not as nice and balmy

"'Have you a sweetheart, Gretchen?'"

and fresh as this, and yet we live on, and, taking one with the other, find life pretty enjoyable, after all!" The casuistry of her speech made no convert. How could it?—it had not any weight with herself.

The girl shook her head mournfully, and gazed at her with sad eyes, but not speaking a word. "I thought, signorina," said she, at last, "that the handsome prince——"

"Go to your dinner, Gretchen. You are late already," said Julia, sharply, and the girl withdrew, abashed and downcast. When thus alone, Julia sat still, wearied by her late exertions. She leaned her head on the arm of the chair, and fell fast asleep. The soft summer wind that came tempered through the window-blinds played with her hair and fanned her to heavy slumber—at first, dreamless slumber, the price of actual fatigue.

Jack Bramleigh, who had been wandering about alone, doing his best to think over himself and his future, but not making any remarkable progress in the act, had at length turned into the house, strolling from room to room, half unconsciously, half struck by the vastness and extent of the building. Chance at last led him along the corridor which ended in this chamber, and he entered, gazing carelessly around him, till suddenly he thought he heard the deep-drawn breathing of one in heavy sleep. He drew nigh, and saw it was Julia. The arm on which her head lay hung listlessly down, and her hand was half hid in the masses of her luxuriant hair. Noiselessly, stealthily, Jack crept to her feet, and crouched down upon the floor, seeming to drink in her long breathings with an ecstasy of delight. Oh, what a moment was that! Through how many years of life was it to pass; the one bright thread of gold in the dark tissue of existence. As such he knew it; so he felt it; and to this end he treasured up every trait and every feature of the scene. "It is all that I shall soon have to look back upon," thought he; and yet to be thus near her seemed a bliss of perfect ecstasy.

More than a hour passed over, and he was still there, not daring to move lest he should awake her. At last he thought her lips seemed to murmur something. He bent down, close—so close that he felt her breath on his face. Yes, she was dreaming—dreaming, too, of long ago: for he heard her mutter the names of places near where they had lived in Ireland. It was of some party of pleasure she was dreaming—her dropping words indicated so much; and at last she

said, "No, no; not Lisconnor. Jack doesn't like Lisconnor." Oh, how he blessed her for the words; and bending over, he touched the heavy curl of her hair with his lips. Some passing shock startled her, and she awoke with a start and a faint cry. "Where am I?" she cried; "what is this?" and she stared at him with her wide full glance, while her features expressed terror and bewilderment.

"Don't be frightened, dearest. You are safe, and at home with those who love you."

"And how are you here? how came you here?" asked she, still terrified.

"I was strolling listlessly about, and chance led me here. I saw you asleep in that chair, and I lay down at your feet till you should awake."

"I know nothing of it at all," muttered she. "I suppose I was dreaming. I fancied I was in Ireland, and we were about to go on some excursion, and I thought Marion was not pleased with me;—how stupid it is to try and disentangle a dream. You shouldn't have been here, Master Jack. Except in fairy tales, young princes never take such liberties as this, and even then the princesses are under enchantment."

"It is *I* that am under the spell, not *you*, Julia," said he, fondly.

"Then you are come to ask pardon for all your crossness, your savagery of this morning?"

"Yes, if you desire it."

"No, sir; I desire nothing of the kind; it must be spontaneous humility. You must feel you have behaved very ill, and be very, very sorry for it."

"I have behaved very ill, and am very, very sorry for it," repeated he softly after her.

"And this is said seriously?"

"Seriously."

"And on honour?"

"On honour!"

"And why is it said—is it because I have asked you to say it?"

"Partly; that is, you have in asking given me courage to say it."

"Courage to ask pardon! what do you mean by that?"

"No; but courage to make me hope you care to hear it. Oh, Julia, for once listen to me seriously and let me tell you how I love you; how I have always loved you; how you are to me all that is worth living for."

"It would be very nice to be told such pretty things, all the more being bound to believe them."

"And do you doubt?"

"I'll tell you what there is not, nor can be any doubt about, Jack; that we are both very poor, and though I, woman-like, may feel it a very comforting and sustaining thought, through my poverty, that one honest heart beats affectionately for me, yet I'm far from sure that it would be the same good influence over *your* life; in fact, our bargain would be unequal, and I should have all the best of it."

"Oh, Julia, could you love me——"

"I think I've done things fully as hard," said she, with affected thoughtfulness.

"Do you think me then so hopeless of advancement in life that I shall live and die the humble creature you now see me?"

"No, I don't think that. I think if fate is not very dead against you, you are likely, whatever you turn to, or wherever you go, to make your way, but to do this, you must be heart-whole; the selfishness that men call ambition cannot afford to be weighted with thought of another and another's welfare. Have a little patience with me—hear me out, for I am saying what I have thought over many and many an hour—what I have already told Nelly. There's an old Persian fable that says, the people who love on through life, are like two lovers who walk on opposite banks of a river and never meet till the river mingles with the ocean which is eternity, and then they are parted no more. Are you satisfied with this? I thought not. Well, what are your plans for the future?"

"I have scores of them. If I would take service with any of those South American republics, there is not one would not give me rank and station to-morrow. Brazil would take me. If I offered myself to the Sultan's Government, where I am known, I could have a command at once."

"I don't know that I like Turkish ideas on the married state," said she, gravely.

"Julia, Julia! do not torture me," cried he anxiously. "It is my very life is at stake—be serious for once;" he took her hand tenderly as he spoke, and was bending down to kiss it, when a heavy foot was heard approaching, and suddenly L'Estrange burst into the room with an open newspaper in his hand.

"I have got something here will surprise you, Jack," he

cried. "You will be astonished to learn that you owe your escape from Ischia to no intrepidity of your own; that you had neither act nor part in the matter, but that it was all due to the consummate skill of a great diplomatist, who represented England at Naples. Listen to this—it is 'our own special correspondent' who writes:—'I have naturally been curious to ascertain the exact history of Rogers' escape, the journals of this country having invested that event with most melodramatic, I might go further, and say incredible, details. My own knowledge of the precautions adopted against evasion, and the jealous care bestowed by the Neapolitan Government towards political prisoners, rendered me slow to believe that an unaided convict would have the slightest chance of effecting his liberation, and as far as I can learn, late events have not diminished in any degree my faith in this opinion.

"'If the stories which circulate in diplomatic circles are to be credited, it was H. B. M.'s special envoy at this Court who planned the whole achievement. He, seeing the fatal obduracy of the King's Ministers, and the utter impracticability of all proceedings to instil into them notions of right or honour, determined, while prosecuting the cause with unusual ardour, to remove the basis of the litigation. By what bribery he effected his object, or of whom, I do not profess to know, though very high names are mentioned with unsparing freedom here, but the fact remains, that when the last despatch of the Foreign Secretary was on its way to our envoy, Rogers was careering over the glad waters in one of H. M.'s steam-launches—thus relieving the controversy of a very material and interesting item in the negotiation. Of course, this has no other foundation than mere rumour, but it is a rumour that no one assumes to discredit, nor, indeed, any to deny, except the very discreet officials of our mission here, who naturally protest that it is a fabrication of the French press. The envoy is still here, and actively proceeding against the Government for an indemnity for unjust imprisonment.' And now, Jack, here is the best of all. Listen to this: 'So sensible are our ministers at home of the great service rendered by this adroit measure, the relief experienced by the removal of what at any moment might have become the very gravest of all questions—that of peace or war—that no reward is deemed too high for its distinguished author, and his Excellency Lord Viscount Culduff'—Culduff——"

"Lord Culduff!" cried Jack and Julia, in amazement.

"'Viscount Culduff has been offered the post of ambassador at Constantinople!'"

Jack snatched the paper from his hands, and stared in mute amazement at the lines.

"And is this the way fortunes are made in the world?" cried he at last.

"Only in the great walks of life, Jack," said Julia. "Small people talk and labour, take service in Argentine republics, or fight for Mussulmen; distinguished people fire but one shot, but it always explodes in the enemy's magazine."

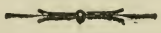
"I wonder what he would have thought if he had known for whom he was negotiating," said Jack, drily. "I half suspect my distinguished brother-in-law would have left me in chains far rather than drive down the Corso with me."

"I declare—no, I won't say the spiteful thing that crossed my mind—but I *will* say, I'd like to have seen a meeting between you and your brother Temple."

"You think he'd have been so ashamed of me," said Jack with a laugh.

"Not a bit of it. *You* might possibly have been ashamed of the situation—shocked with being such an unworthy member of a great house—but *he*, Temple, would have accepted you like a fever or an ague—a great calamity sent from above—but he would not have felt shame, any more than if you had been the scarlatina. Look at poor George," cried she, with a merry laugh. "He thinks I've said something very wicked, and he feels he ought to deplore it, and possibly rebuke me."

Jack could not help laughing at the rueful expression of L'Estrange's face, and his emotion was catching, for the others joined in the laugh, and in this merry mood returned to the garden.



CHAPTER LX.

A RETURN HOME.

The morning that followed this scene broke very happily on the villa, for Augustus was to arrive by the afternoon packet, and all were eager to meet him. His telegram said, "Cutbill is with me; but I do not know if he will stop." And this announcement, indeed, more than tempered the pleasure they felt at the thought of meeting Augustus.

Jack, whose sailor's eye had detected a thin streak of smoke in the sky long ere the others had seen it, and knew by what time the steamer might arrive, hastened down to the shore to meet his brother alone, not wishing that the first meeting should be observed by others. And he was so far right. Men as they were—tried and hardened by the world's conflict—they could not speak as they clasped each other in their arms; and when they separated to gaze at each other's faces, their eyes swam in heavy tears. "My poor fellow!" was all that Augustus could say for several minutes, till, struck by the manly vigour and dignified bearing of the other, he cried out, "What a great powerful fellow you have grown, Jack. You are twice as strong as you used to be."

"Strong enough, Gusty; but I suppose I shall heed it all. But how comes it that you have grey hair here?"

"You find me terribly changed, Jack. I have aged greatly since we met."

"You are tired now, old fellow. A little rest and the pleasant care of the villa will soon set you up again."

"Perhaps so. At all events I have strength enough for what I am called on to bear. How are they all?"

"Well and hearty. I'd say jollier than I ever saw them before."

"What a noble girl is Nelly."

"Ay, and her companion, too. I tell you, Gusty, there's the same comrade spirit amongst girls that there is in a ship's company; and where good ones come together, they make each other better. But tell me now of yourself. What's your news?"

"Not good; far from it. I believe, indeed, our cause is 'up.' He—Pracontal I mean—intends to behave hand-

somely by us. There will be no severity used. Indeed, he means to go further; but I'll have time enough for all this later on. I'm so glad to see you again, my poor dear fellow, that I have no mind to think of anything else."

"How did you get rid of Cutbill?"

"I haven't got rid of him; he is on board there. I don't think he means to land. I suspect he'll go on with the steamer to-night: and he is so ashamed to show, that he is snug in his berth all this time."

"But what does he mean by that?"

"He's in a scrape, Jack, and had to get away from England to save himself from a gaol; but I'll tell you the story this evening,—or better still, I'll make him tell you, if you can manage to persuade him to come on shore."

"That he shall do," said Jack. "He behaved like a trump to me once when I was in trouble; and I don't forget it." And so saying, he hastened on board the packet, and hurried below, to re-appear in a few minutes, holding Cutbill by the collar, as though he were his prisoner.

"Here's the culprit," cried Jack; "and if he won't land his luggage, he must take to a Montenegro rig like mine; and he'll become it well."

"There don't collar me that fashion. See how the fellows are all staring at us. Have you no decency?"

"Will you come quietly, then?"

"Yes; let them hand up my two trunks and my violin case. What a droll place this is."

"There's many a worse, I can tell you, than our villa yonder. If it were my own, I'd never ask to leave it."

"Nor need you, Jack," whispered Augustus. "I've brought back money to buy it; and I hope it will be our home this many a day."

"What's this scrape of yours, Cutty?" said Jack, as they made their way homewards. "Whom have you been robbing this time, or was it forgery?"

"Let him tell you," said Cutbill doggedly, as he motioned with his hand towards Gusty.

"It's a mixed case of robbery with housebreaking," said Augustus. "Pracontal had taken it into his head that certain papers of great value to himself were concealed in some secret press in our house at Castello; and Cutbill was just as convinced that there were no papers and no press, and that the whole was a dream or a delusion. They argued the case so often that they got to quarrel about it."

"No, we didn't quarrel," broke in Cutbill, sulkily; "we betted."

"Yes, that is more correct. Pracontal was so firmly persuaded that the papers existed that he offered three to one on it, and Cutbill, who likes a good thing, took it in hundreds."

"No. I wish I had. It was in fifties."

"As they had no permission to make the search, which required to break down the wall, and damage a valuable fresco——"

"No. It was under the fresco, in a pedestal. I'd engage to make it good for thirty shillings," broke in Cutbill.

"Well, we'll not dispute that. The essential point is, that Pracontal's scruples would not permit him to proceed to an act of depredation, but that Cutbill had more resolution. He wanted to determine the fact."

"Say that he wanted to win his money, and you'll be nearer the mark," interposed Cutbill.

"Whichever way we take it, it amounts to this, Pracontal would not be a housebreaker, and Cutbill had no objection to become one. I cannot give you the details of the infraction —perhaps *he* will."

Cutbill only grunted, and the other went on—"However he obtained entrance, he made his way to the place indicated, smashed the wall, and dragged forth a box with four or five thick volumes, which turned out to be the parish registries of Portshannon for a very eventful period, at least a very critical one for us, for, if the discovery loses Mr. Cutbill his fifty pounds, it places the whole estate in jeopardy."

"That's the worst of it," cried Cutbill. "My confounded meddling has done it all."

"When my lawyer came to hear what had occurred, and how, he lost no time in taking measures to proceed against Cutbill for a felony; but Master C. had got away, and was already hiding in Germany, and our meeting on the steamboat here was a mere hazard. He was bound for—where was it Cutbill?"

"Albania. I want to see the salt mines. There's something to be done there now that the Turks are not sure they'll own the country this time twelvemonth."

"At all events, it's better air than Newgate," said Jack.

"As you politely observe, sir, it's better air than Newgate. By the way, you've been doing a little stroke of work as a gaolbird latterly—is it jolly?"

"No; it ain't exactly jolly; it's too monotonous for that. And then the diet."

"Ah, there's the rub! It's the skilly, it's the four-ounce system, I'm afraid of. Make it a good daily regimen, and I'll not quarrel with the mere confinement, nor ask for any extension of the time allotted to exercise."

"I must say," said Jack, "that, for a very acute and ingenious gentleman, this same piece of burglary was about one of the stupidest performances I ever heard of."

"Not so fast, admiral, not so fast. I stood on a double event. I had lent Pracontal a few hundreds, to be repaid by as many thousands if he established his claim. I began to repent of my investment, and my bet was a hedge. Do you see, old fellow, if there were no books, I pocketed a hundred and fifty. If the books turned up, I stood to win on the trial. You may perceive that Tom Cutbill sleeps like a weazel, and has always one eye open."

"Was it a very friendly part, then, to lend a man money to prosecute a claim against your own friend?" asked Jack.

"Lord love ye, I'd do that against my brother. The man of business and the desk is one thing, the man of human feelings and affections is another. If a man follows any pursuit worth the name of a pursuit, the ardour to succeed in it will soon swamp his scruples; aye, and not leave him one jot the worse for it. Listen to me a minute. Did you ever practise fly-fishing? Well, can you deny it is in principle as ignoble a thing as ever was called sport? It begins in a fraud, and it finishes with a cruelty; and will you tell me that your moral nature, or any grand thing that you fancy dignifies you, was impaired or stained when you landed that eight-pound trout on the grass?"

"You forget that men are not trout, Master Cutbill."

"There are a good number of them gudgeons, I am happy to say," cried he. "Give me a light for my cigar, for I am sick of discussion. Strange old tumble-down place this—might all be got for a song, I'd swear. What a grand spec it would be to start a company to make a watering place of it: 'The Baths of Cattaro, celebrated in the time of Diocle-sian'—eh? Jack, doesn't your mouth water at the thought of 'preliminary expenses?'"

"I can't say it does. I've been living among robbers lately, and I found them very dull company."

"The sailor is rude; his manners smack of the cockpit," said Cutbill, nudging Augustus in the side. "Oh, dear how

I'd like a commission to knock this old town into a bathing machine."

"You'll have ample time to mature your project up at the villa. There, you see it yonder."

"And is that the British flag I see waving there? Wait a moment till I master my emotion, and subdue the swelling feelings of my breast."

"I'll tell you what, Master Cutbill," said Jack, sternly, "if you utter any stupid rubbish against the Union Jack, I'll be shot if I don't drop you over the sea-wall for a ducking; and, what's more, I'll not apologize to you when you come out."

"Outrage the second. The naval service is not what I remember it."

"Here come the girls," said Augustus. "I hear Julia's merry laugh in the wood."

"The L'Estrange girl isn't it?" asked Cutbill; and though Jack started and turned almost as if to seize him, he never noticed the movement.

"Miss L'Estrange," said Augustus Bramleigh.

"Why didn't you say she was here, and I'd not have made any 'bones' about stopping? I don't know I was ever as spooney as I was about that girl up at Albano. And didn't I work like a negro to get back her two thousand pounds out of that precious coal mine? Aye, and succeeded too. I hope she knows it was Tom Cutbill saved the ship. Maybe she'll think I've come to claim salvage."

"She has heard of all your good-nature, and is very grateful to you," said Gusty.

"That's right; that's as it ought to be. Doing good by stealth always strikes me as savouring of a secret society. It's Thuggee, or Fenian, or any other dark association you like."

"I'll go forward and meet them, if you'll permit me," said Augustus, and, not waiting a reply, hurried on towards the wood.

"Look here, Master Jack," said Cutbill, stopping short and facing round in front of him. "If you mean as a practice to sit upon me on every occasion that arises, just please to say so."

"Nothing of the kind, man; if I did, I promise you once would be quite enough."

"Oh, that's it, is it?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Shake hands, then, and let us have no more squabbling. If you ever find me getting into shoal-water, and likely to touch a sandbank, just call out 'stop her!' and you'll see how I'll reverse my engine at once. It's not in my line, the locomotives, but I *could* drive if I was put to it, and I know well every good lesson a man acquires from the practice."

"What do you think of this cause of ours, Cutty; how does it look to your eyes?"

"Just as dark as thunder! Why you go to trial at all next term I can't make out. Pracontal's case is clear as noonday. There's the proof of the marriage—as legal a marriage as if an archbishop celebrated it, and there's the registry of birth, and there is, to confirm all, old Bramleigh's letters. If you push on after such a show of danger signals as these, it is because you must like a smash."

"You'd strike, then, without firing a shot?"

"To be sure I would, if it was only to save the expense of the powder; besides, Pracontal has already declared, that if met by an amicable spirit on your brother's part, there are no terms he would not accede to, to secure recognition by your family, and acceptance as one of you."

"I'm sure I don't see why he should care for it."

"Nor I, for the matter of that. If there's a lot in life I'd call enviable, it would be to be born in a foundling hospital, and inherit ten thousand a year. A landed estate, and no relations, comes nearer to my ideas of Paradise than anything in Milton's poems."

"Here they come," cried Jack, as a merry group issued from the road, and came joyously forward to meet them.

"Here's this good fellow Tom Cutbill come to spend some days with us," said Jack, as the girls advanced to greet him.

"Isn't it kind of him?" said Cutbill, "isn't it like that disinterested good-nature that always marks him? Of course I'm heartily welcome! how could it be otherwise. Miss Bramleigh, you do me proud. Miss Julia, your slave. Ah, your reverence! let's have a shake of your devout paw. Now I call this as pleasant a place for a man to go through his sentence of transportation as need be. Do the ladies know what I'm charged with?"

"They know nothing, they desire to know nothing," said Augustus. "When we have dined and had our coffee, you shall make your own confession; and that only if you like it, and wish to disburden your conscience."

"My conscience is pretty much like my balance at my

banker's—it's a mighty small matter, but somehow it never troubles me; and you'll see by-and-by that it doesn't interfere with my appetite."

"You saw my sister at Naples, Mr. Cutbill," said Nelly, "how was she looking?"

"Decidedly handsome; and as haughty as handsome; as an Irish friend who was walking with me one day her carriage passed, observed, 'A bow from her was the next thing to a black-eye.'"

"Marion's pride always became her," said Nelly, coldly.

"It must be a comfort to her to feel she has a great stock of what suits her constitution."

"And the noble Viscount," asked Jack, "how was he looking?"

"As fresh as paint. The waxworks in the museum seemed faded and worn after him. He was in an acute attack of youth, the day I dined with him last, and I hope his system has not suffered for it."

"Stop her," muttered Jack, with a sly look at Cutbill; and to the surprise of the others, that astute individual rejoined, "Stop her, it is."

"We dine at four, I think?" said Bramleigh, "and there's just time to dress. Jack, take charge of Cutbill, and show him where he is to lodge."

"And is it white choker and a fiddle coat? Do you tell me you dress for dinner?" asked Cutbill.

"Mr. Cutbill shall do exactly as he pleases," said Julia; "we only claim a like privilege for ourselves."

"You've got it now, Tom Cutbill," said he, sorrowfully, "and I hope you like it."

And with this they went their several ways; Jack alone lingering in the garden in the hope to have one word with Julia, but she did not return, and his "watch on deck," as he called it, was not relieved.

CHAPTER LXI.

LADY CULDUFF'S LETTER.

A LONG letter, a letter of several pages, from Marion, reached the villa; and though it is not my intention to ask the reader to listen to it textually or throughout, I crave permission to give certain parts of its contents.

As Lady Culduff prospered in the world, she became what she thought "devout," and perpetually reminded all around her that she was well aware she was living in a very sinful world, and keeping daily company with transgressors; and she actually brought herself to believe that by a repeated reference to the wickedness of this life, she was entering a formal protest against sin, and qualifying herself, at this very cheap price, for something much better hereafter.

She was—and it was a pet phrase with her—"resigned" to everything: resigned to Lord Culduff's being made a grand cross and an ambassador, with the reasonable prospect of an earldom; resigned to her own great part—and was it not a great part?—in this advancement; resigned to be an ambassadress! That she was resigned to the ruin and downfall of her family, especially if they should have the delicacy and good taste to hide themselves somewhere, and not obtrude that ruin and downfall on the world, was plainly manifest; and when she averred that, come what might, we ought to be ever assured that all things were for the best, she meant in reality to say, it was a wise dispensation that sent herself to live in a palace at Pera, and left her brothers and sisters to shiver out existence in barbarism.

There was not a shadow of hypocrisy in all this. She believed every word she said upon it. She accepted the downfall of her family as her share of those ills which are the common lot of humanity; and she was very proud of the fortitude that sustained her under this heavy trial, and of that resignation that enabled her not to grieve over these things in an unseemly fashion, or in any way that might tell on her complexion.

"After that splendid success of Culduff's at Naples," wrote she, "of which the newspapers are full, I need not

remind you that we ought to have had Paris, and, indeed, must have had it, but the Ministry made it a direct and personal favour of Culduff that he would go and set that troublesome Eastern question to rights. As you know nothing of politics, dear Nelly, and, indeed, are far happier in that ignorance, I shall not enter upon what, even with the fullest explanation, would only bewilder you. Enough if you know that we have to out-manœuvre the Russians, baffle the French, and bully the Greeks; and that there is not for the task Culduff's equal in England. I think I see your astonishment that I should talk of such themes: they were not certainly the sort of subjects which once occupied our thoughts: but, my dear Nelly, in linking your fate to that of a man of high ambition, you accept the companionship of his intellect, instead of a share in his heart. And, as you well know I always repudiated the curate and cottage theory, I accept the alternative without repining. Can I teach you any of this philosophy, Nelly, and will it lighten the load of your own sorrows to learn how I have come to bear mine? It is in the worldliness of people generally lies their chief unhappiness. They will not, as Culduff says, 'accept the situation.' Now we have accepted it, we submit to it, and, in consequence, suffer fewer heart-burnings and repinings than our neighbours. Dear Augustus never had any costly tastes; and as for yourself, simplicity was your badge in everything. Temple is indeed to be pitied, for Temple, with money to back him, might have made a respectable figure in the world and married well; but Temple, a poor man, must fall down to a second-class legation, and look over the Minister's larder. Culduff tried, but failed to make something of him. As C. told him one day, you have only to see Charles Mathews act, to be convinced that to be a coxcomb a man must be consummately clever; and yet it is exactly the 'rôle' every empty fellow fancies would suit him. T. resented this, well meant as it was, and resigned his secretaryship. He has gone over to England, but I do not imagine with much prospect of re-employment.

"Do not think, my dear Nelly, of quitting your present refuge. You are safe now, and in harbour, and be slow to adventure on that wide ocean of life where shipwrecks are occurring on every hand. So long as one is obscure, poverty has no terrors. As Culduff says, you may always wear a ragged coat in the dark. It is we, who unfortunately must walk in the noonday, cannot be seen unless in fine raiment,

Do not mistake me, however. I say this without complaint; I repine at nothing.

"I had written so much of my letter, dear Nelly, intending to finish it at Rome; but Culduff is obliged to hurry on to Ischl, where some great diplomatic gathering is now assembled, and I must omit a number of things I desire to say to you.

"Culduff thinks we must call on Lady Augusta as we go through. I own I have done my best to avoid this, and if I must go, it will not be in the best of tempers. The oddest thing of all is, C. dislikes her fully as much as I do; but there is some wonderful freemasonry among these people that obliges them, like the members of a secret society, to certain *égards* towards each other; and I am satisfied he would rather do a positive wrong to some one in middle-class life than be wanting in some punctilio or attention to a person of her condition. I have often been much provoked by displays of this sentiment, needlessly paraded to offend my own sense of propriety. I shall add a line after my visit.

"Rome.

"I have news for you. M. Pracontal—if this be his name—not only takes your estates, but your stepmother. The odious woman had the effrontery to tell us so to our faces. How I bore it, what I said, or felt or suffered, I know not. Some sort of fit, I believe, seized me, for Culduff sent for a physician when I got back to the hotel, and our departure was deferred.

"The outrage of this conduct has so shaken my nerves that I can scarcely write, nor is my sense of indignation lessened by the levity with which it pleases Culduff to treat the whole matter. 'It is a bold coup—a less courageous woman would have recoiled from it—she is very daring.' This is what he says of her. She has the courage that says to the world, 'I am ready to meet all your censures and your reproaches;' but I never heard this called heroism before. Must I own to you, Nelly, that what overwhelms me most in this disgraceful event is the confidence it evinces in this man's cause. 'You may swear,' said Culduff, 'that she is backing the winner. Women are timid gamblers, and never risk their money without almost every chance in their favour.' I know that my lord plumes himself on knowing a great deal about us, prompting him at times to utter much that is less than complimentary; but I give you this opinion of his here for what

it is worth, frankly owning that my dislike to the woman is such I can be no fair judge of any case into which she enters.

"Pracontal—I only saw him for an instant—struck me as a third-class Frenchman, something between a *sous-officer* of cavalry and a *commis-voyageur;* not ill-looking, and set up with that air of the soldier that in France does duty for dignity. He had a few hasty words with Culduff, but did not persist nor show any desire to make a row in presence of ladies. So far, his instincts as a corporal guided him safely. Had he been led by the *commis-voyageur* side of his character, we should have had a most disgraceful scene, ending by a hostile meeting between a British peer and a bagman.

"My nerves have been so shaken by this incident, and my recollection is still so charged with this odious woman's look, voice, and manner, that I cannot trust myself to say more. Be assured, dear Nelly, that in all the miserable details of this great calamity to our family, no one event has occurred equal in poignant suffering to the insult I have thus been subjected to.

"Culduff will not agree to it, but I declare to you she was positively vulgar in the smirking complacence in which she presented the man as her future husband. She was already *passée* when she married my father, and the exuberant joy at this proposal revealed the old maid's nature. C., of course, calls her charming, a woman of very attractive qualities, and such like; but men of a certain age have ideas of their own on these subjects, and, like their notions on cookery, make no converts among people under forty. I believe I told him so, and, in consequence the whole theme has been strictly avoided by each of us ever since."

The remainder of the letter was devoted to details as to her future life at Constantinople, and the onerous duties that would devolve on her as ambassadress. She hinted also to a time when she would ask dear Nelly to come and visit her; but, of course, until matters were fully settled and concluded, she could not expect her to leave dear Gusty.

The postcript ran thus; "Culduff meant to have given some small Church promotion to young L'Estrange, and, indeed, believed he had done so: but some difficulty has arisen. It is either not his turn, or the Bishop is troublesome, or the Ecclesiastical Commissioners—if there be such people—are making objections. If he—I mean L'Estrange—be still disengaged, would it be wise to offer him the chaplaincy to the embassy? I mean wise as regards our-

selves; but I take it the sister may be still unmarried, and if she be like what I remember her, a person not easily suppressed, nor at all indisposed to assume airs of perfect equality, even with those separated from her by a whole hemisphere of station. Give me your candid advice on this point, not thinking of *them*, but of *me*, for though I feel Julia—is not that her name?—would be insupportable, the parson himself would be very useful, and I think a comfort to me.

"Of course you will not consult any one upon this matter. It is your own personal opinion I want, and you will give it to me, knowing me and my prejudices—I suppose I had better call them—and not thinking of your own leanings and likings for the girl. She may, for aught I know, have changed. Culduff has some wise saw about acid wines growing dry by age; I don't know whether young ladies mellow in this fashion, but Julia was certainly tart enough once to have tested the theory, and might be the 'Amontillado' of old maids by this time."

It may be imagined that after a sally of this kind it was not easy for the writer to recover that semi-moralizing vein in which the letter opened. Nor did she. The conclusion was abrupt, and merely directed Nelly to address her next to the Summer Palace at Therapia; "for those horrid people, our predecessors, have left the embassy house in such a condition it will take weeks and several thousand pounds to make it habitable. There must be a vote taken 'in supply' on this. I am writing Greek to you, poor child; but I mean they must give us money, and, of course, the discussion will expose us to many impertinences. One writer declared that he never knew of a debate on the estimates without an allusion to Lord Culduff's wig. We shall endure this—if not with patience, without resentment. Love to dear Gusty, and believe me your affectionate sister,

"MARION CULDUFF."

Such were the most striking passages of a long letter which, fortunately for Nelly, Mr. Cutbill's presence at the breakfast-table rescued her from the indiscretion of reading aloud. One or two extracts she did give, but soon saw that the document was one which could not be laid on the table, nor given without prejudice to the public service. Her confusion, as she crumpled up the paper, and thrust it back into its envelope, was quickly remarked, and Mr. Cutbill, with

his accustomed tact, observed, "I'd lay a 'fiver' we've all of us been led out for a canter in that epistle. It's enough to see Miss Ellen's face to know that she wouldn't read it out for fifty pounds. Eh, what!" cried he, stooping and rubbing his leg; "I told you to say, 'Stop her, Master Jack, when you wanted to take weigh off, but I never said, Kick my shins.'"

This absurd exclamation, and the laugh it provoked, was a lucky diversion, and they arose from table without another thought on Marion's epistle.

"Has Nelly shown you Marion's note?" asked Jack, as he strolled with Julia through the garden.

"No, and it is perhaps the only letter I ever knew her to get without handing me to read."

"I suspect, with Cutbill, that we all of us catch it in that pleasant document."

"*You* perhaps are the only one who has escaped."

"As for *me*, I am not even remembered. Well, I'll bear even that, if I can be sure of a little sympathy in another quarter."

"Master Jack, you ask for too many professions. I have told you already to-day, and I don't mean to repeat it for a week, that you are not odious to me."

"But will you not remember, Julia, the long months of banishment I have suffered? Will you not bear in mind that if I have lived longingly for this moment, it is cruel now to dash it with a doubt."

"But it is exactly what I am not doing! I have given you fully as much encouragement as is good for you. I have owned—and it is a rash confession for a girl to make at any time—that I care for you more than any part of our prospects for the future could warrant, and if I go one step further there will be nothing for it but for you to buy a bragotza and turn fisherman, and for me to get a basket and sell pilchards in the piazza."

"You needn't taunt me with my poverty, I feel it bitterly enough already. Nor have you any right to think me unable to win a living."

"There, again, you wrong me. I only said, Do not, in your impatience to reach your goal, make it not worth the winning. Don't forget what I told you about long engagements. A man's share of them is the worst."

"But you love me, Julia?" said he, drawing her close to him.

"How tiresome you are!" said she, trying to free herself from his arm.

"Let me once—only once—hear you say this, and I swear to you, Julia, I'll never tease you more."

"Well, then if I must——"

More was not spoken, for the lips were pressed by a rapturous kiss, as he clasped her to his heart, muttering, "My own, my own!"

"I declare there is Nelly," cried Julia, wresting herself from his embrace, and starting off; not, however, towards Ellen, but in the direction of the house.

"Oh, Nelly," said Jack, rushing towards his sister, "she loves me—she has said so—she is all my own."

"Of course she is, Jack. I never doubted it, though I own I scarcely thought she'd have told it."

And the brother and sister walked along hand in hand without speaking, a closer pressure of the fingers at intervals alone revealing how they followed the same thoughts and lived in the same joys.

CHAPTER LXII.

DEALING WITH CUTBILL.

"WHAT'S to be done with Cutbill?—will any one tell me this?" was the anxious question Augustus asked as he stood in a group composed of Jack, Nelly, and the L'Estranges. "As to Sedley meeting him at all, I know that is out of the question; but the mere fact of finding the man here will so discredit us in Sedley's eyes that it is more than likely he will pitch up the whole case and say good bye to us for ever."

"But can he do that?" asked Julia. "Can he, I mean, permit a matter of temper or personal feeling to interfere in a dry affair of duty?"

"Of course he can; where his counsels are disregarded and even counteracted he need not continue his guidance. He is a hot-tempered man besides, and has more than once shown me that he will not bear provocation beyond certain limits."

"I think," began L'Estrange, "if I were in *your* place, I'd tell Cutbill. I'd explain to him how matters stood; and——"

"No, no," broke in Jack; "that won't do at all. The poor dog is too hard up for that."

"Jack is right," said Nelly, warmly.

"Of course he is, so far as Mr. Cutbill goes," broke in Julia; "but we want to do right to every one. Now, how about your brother and his suit?"

"What if I were to show him this letter," said Augustus, "to let him see that Sedley means to be here to-morrow, to remain at farthest three days; is it not likely Cutbill would himself desire to avoid meeting him?"

"Not a bit of it," cried Jack. "It's the thing of all others he'd glory in; he'd be full of all the lively impertinences that he could play off on the lawyer; and he'd write a comic song on him—ay, and sing it in his own presence."

"Nothing more likely," said Julia, gravely.

"Then what it to be done? Is there no escape out of the difficulty?" asked Augustus.

"Yes," said Nelly, "I think there is. The way I should advise would be this: I'd show Mr. Cutbill Sedley's letter, and taking him into counsel, as it were, on the embarrassment of his own position, I'd say, 'We must hide you somewhere for these three days.'"

"But he wouldn't see it, Nelly. He'd laugh at your delicate scruples; he'd say, 'That's the one man in all Europe I'm dying to meet.'"

"Nelly is quite right, notwithstanding," said Julia. "There is more than one side to Mr. Cutbill's nature. He'd like to be thought a very punctilious gentleman fully as much as a very jocose companion. Make him believe that in keeping out of sight here at this moment he will be exercising a most refined delicacy—doing what nothing short of a high-bred sensibility would ever have dreamed of, and you'll see he'll be as delighted with his part as ever he was with his coarse drollery. And here he comes to test my theory about him."

As she spoke Cutbill came lounging up the garden walk, too busily engaged in making a paper cigarette to see those in front of him.

"I'm sure, Mr. Cutbill, that cigarette must be intended for me," cried Julia, "seeing all the pains you are bestowing on its manufacture."

"Ah, Miss Julia, if I could only believe that you'd let me corrupt your morals to the extent of a pinch of Latakia——"

"Give me Sedley's letter, Gusty," said Nelly, "and leave the whole arrangement to me. Mr. Cutbill, will you kindly let me have three minutes of your company? I want a bit of advice from you." And she took his arm as she spoke and led him down the garden. She wasted no time in preliminaries, but at once came to the point, saying, "We're in what you would call 'a fix' this morning, Mr. Cutbill: my brother's lawyer, Mr. Sedley, is coming here most unexpectedly. We know that some unpleasant passages have occurred between you and that gentleman, making a meeting between you quite impossible; and in the great difficulty of the moment I have charged myself with the solution of the embarrassment, and now begin to see that without your aid I am powerless. Will you help me; that is, will you advise with or for me?"

"Of course I will; but, first of all, where's the difficulty you speak of? I'd no more mind meeting this man—sitting

next him at dinner, if you like, than I would an old creditor —and I have a good many of them—that I never mean to pay."

"We never doubted *your* tact, Mr. Cutbill," said she, with a strong emphasis on the pronoun.

"If so, then the matter is easy enough. Tact always serves for two. If *I* be the man you take me for, that crabbed old fellow will love me like a brother before the first day is over."

"That's not the question, Mr. Cutbill. Your personal powers of captivation no one disputes, if only they get a fair field for their exercise; but what we fear is that Mr. Sedley, being the hot-tempered, hasty man he is, will not give you this chance. My brother has twice already been on the verge of a rupture with him for having acted on his own independent judgment. I believe nothing but his regard for poor dear papa would have made him forgive Augustus; and when I tell you that in the present critical state of our cause his desertion of us would be fatal, I am sure you will do anything to avert such a calamity."

"Let us meet, Miss Ellen; let us dine together once—I only ask once—and if I don't borrow money from him before he takes his bedroom candle, you may scratch Tom Cutbill, and put him off 'the course' for ever. What does that impatient shrug of the shoulders mean? Is it as much as to say, 'What a conceited snob it is!' eh?"

"Oh, Mr. Cutbill, you couldn't possibly——"

"Couldn't I, though? And don't I know well that I am just as vain of my little talents—as your friend, Miss Julia, called them—as you and others are ready to ridicule them; but the real difference between us after all is this: *You* think the world at large is a monstrous clever creature, with great acuteness, great discrimination, and great delicacy; and I *know* it be a great overgrown bully, mistaking half it hears, and blundering all it says, so that any one, I don't care who he is, that will stand out from the crowd in life, think his own thoughts and guide his own actions, may just do what he pleases with that unwieldy old monster, making it believe it's the master, all the while it is a mere slave and a drudge. There's another shrug of the shoulders. Why not say it out—you're a puppy, Tom Cutbill?"

"First of all it wouldn't be polite, and secondly——"

"Never mind the secondly. It's quite enough for me to see that I have not convinced you, nor am I half as clever a

fellow as I think myself; and do you know, you're the first I ever knew dispute the position."

"But I do not. I subscribe to it implicitly; my presence here, at this moment, attests how I believe it. It is exactly because I regard Mr. Cutbill as the cleverest person I know—the very ablest to extricate one from a difficulty—that I have come to him this morning."

"My honour is satisfied!" said he, laying his hand on his heart, and bowing with a grand seriousness.

"And now," said Nelly, hurriedly, for her patience had well nigh given in, "what's to be done? I have a project of my own, but I don't know whether you would agree to it."

"Not agree to a project of yours! What do you take me for, Miss Ellen?"

"My dear Mr. Cutbill, I have exhausted all my compliments. I can only say I endorse all the preceding with compound interest."

Slightly piqued by the half sarcasm of her manner, he simply said—"And your project; what is it?"

"That you should be a close prisoner for the short time Mr. Sedley stays here; sufficiently near to be able to communicate and advise with you—for we count much on your counsel—and yet totally safe from even the chance of meeting him. There is a small chapel about a mile off, where the family confessor used to live, in two neat little rooms adjoining the building. These shall be made comfortable for you. We will take care—I will—that you are not starved; and some of us will be sure to go and see you every day, and report all that goes on. I foresee a number of details, but I have no time now to discuss them; the great point is, do you agree?"

"This is Miss Julia's scheme, is it not?"

"No, I assure you; on my word, it is mine."

"But you have concerted it with her?"

"Not even that; she knows nothing of it."

"With whom, then, have you talked it over?"

"With none, save Mr. Cutbill."

"In that case, Mr. Cutbill complies," said he, with a theatrical air of condescension.

"You will go there?"

"Yes, I promise it."

"And remain close prisoner till I liberate you?"

"Everything you command."

"I thank you much, and I am very proud of my success,"

said she, offering her hand. "Shall I own to you," said she, after a pause, "that my brother's nerves have been so shaken by the agitation he has passed through, and by the continual pressure of thinking that it is his own personal fault that this battle has been so ill contested, that the faintest show of censure on him now would be more than he could bear? I have little doubt that the cause is lost, and I am only eager that poor Augustus should not feel it was lost through *him*."

She was greatly agitated as she spoke, and, with a hurried farewell, she turned and left him.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE CLIENT AND HIS LAWYER.

When the rest of the party had left the dinner-room, and Augustus Bramleigh and Mr. Sedley found themselves alone, a silence of several minutes ensued; a very solemn pause each felt it, well knowing that at such a moment the slightest word may be the signal for disclosures which involve a destiny. Up to this, nothing had been said on either side of "the cause;" and though Sedley had travelled across Europe to speak of it, he waited with decorous reserve till his host should invite him to the topic.

Bramleigh, an awkward and timid man at the best of times, was still more so when he found himself in a situation in which he should give the initiative. As the entertainer of a guest, too, he fancied that to introduce his personal interests as matter of conversation would be in bad taste, and so he fidgeted, and passed the decanters across the table with a nervous impatience, trying to seem at his ease, and stammering out at last some unmeaning question about the other's journey.

Sedley replied to the inquiry with a cold and measured politeness, as a man might to a matter purely irrelevant.

"The Continent is comparatively new ground to you, Mr. Sedley?"

"Entirely so. I have never been beyond Brussels before this."

"Late years have nearly effaced national peculiarities.

One crosses frontiers now, and never remembers a change of country."

"Quite so."

"The money, the coinage, perhaps, is the great reminder after all."

"Money is the great reminder of almost everything, everywhere, sir," said Sedley, with a stern and decisive tone.

"I am afraid you are right," said Bramleigh, with a faint sigh; and now they seemed to stand on the brink of a precipice, and look over.

"What news have you for me?" said he at last, gulping as he spoke.

"None to cheer, nothing to give encouragement. The discovery at Castello will ensure them a verdict. We cannot dispute the marriage, it was solemnized in all form and duly witnessed. The birth of the child was also carefully authenticated—there isn't a flaw in the registry, and they'll take care to remind us on the second trial of how freely we scattered our contemptuous sarcasms on the illegitimacy of this connection on the first record."

"Is the case hopeless, then?"

"Nothing is hopeless where a jury enters, but it is only short of hopeless. Kelson of course says he is sure, and perhaps so should I, in his place. Still they might disagree again: there's a strong repugnance felt by juries against dispossessing an old occupant. All can feel the hardship of his case, and the sympathy for him goes a great way."

"Still this would only serve to protract matters—they'd bring another action."

"Of course they would, and Kelson has money!"

"I declare I see no benefit in continuing a hopeless contest."

"Don't be hopeless then, that's the remedy."

Bramleigh made a slight gesture of impatience, and slight as it was, Sedley observed it.

"You have never treated this case as your father would have done, Mr. Bramleigh. He had a rare spirit to face a contest. I remember one day hinting to him that if this claim could be backed by money it would be a very formidable suit, and his answer was:—'When I strike my flag, Sedley, the enemy will find the prize was scarcely worth fighting for.' I knew what he meant was, he'd have mortgaged the estate to every shilling of its value, before there arose a question of his title."

"I don't believe it, sir; I tell you to your face I don't believe it," cried Bramleigh, passionately. "My father was a man of honour, and never would have descended to such duplicity."

"My dear sir, I have not come twelve hundred miles to discuss a question in ethics, nor will I risk myself in a discussion with you. I repeat, sir, that had your father lived to meet this contention, we should not have found ourselves where we are to-day. Your father was a man of considerable capacity, Mr. Bramleigh. He conducted a large and important house with consummate skill; brought up his family handsomely; and had he been spared, would have seen every one of them in positions of honour and consequence."

"To every word in his praise I subscribe heartily and gratefully;" and there was a tremor in his voice as Bramleigh spoke.

"He has been spared a sad spectacle, I must say," continued Sedley. "With the exception of your sister who married that Viscount, ruin—there's only one word for it—ruin has fallen upon you all."

"Will you forgive me if I remind you that you are my lawyer, Mr. Sedley, not my chaplain nor my confessor?"

"Lawyer without a suit! Why, my dear sir, there will be soon nothing to litigate. You and all belonging to you were an imposition and a fraud. There, there! It's nothing to grow angry over; how could you or any of you suspect your father's legitimacy? You accepted the situation as you found it, as all of us do. That you regarded Pracontal as a cheat was no fault of yours,—he says so himself. I have seen him and talked with him; he was at Kelson's when I called last week, and old Kelson said,—'My client is in the next room: he says you treated him rudely one day he went to your office. I wish you'd step in and say a civil word or two. It would do good, Sedley. I tell you it would do good!" and he laid such a significant stress on the word, that I walked straight in and said how very sorry I felt for having expressed myself in a way that could offend him. 'At all events, sir,' said I, 'if you will not accept my apology for myself, let me beseech you to separate the interest of my client from my rudeness, and let not Mr. Bramleigh be prejudiced because his lawyer was ill-mannered.' 'It's all forgotten, never to be recalled,' said he, shaking my hand. 'Has Kelson told you my intentions towards Bramleigh?'

"'He has told me nothing,' said I.

"'Tell him, Kelson. I can't make the matter plain as you can. Tell Mr. Sedley what we were thinking of.'

"In one word, sir, his plan was a partition of the property. He would neither disturb your title nor dispute your name. You should be the Bramleighs of Castello, merely paying him a rent-charge of four thousand a year. Kelson suggested more, but he said a hundred thousand francs was ample, and he made no scruple of adding that he never was master of as many sous in his life.

"'And what does Kelson say to this?' asked I.

"'Kelson says what Sedley would say—that it is a piece of Quixotism worthy of Hanwell.'

"'Ma foi,' said Pracontal, 'it is not the first time I have fired in the air.'

"We talked for two hours over the matter. Part of what Pracontal said was good sound sense, well reasoned and acutely expressed; part was sentimental rubbish, not fit to listen to. At last I obtained leave to submit the whole affair to you, not by letter—that they wouldn't have—but personally, and there, in one word, is the reason of my journey.

"Before I left town, however, I saw the Attorney-General, whose opinion I had already taken on certain points of the case. He was a personal friend of your father, and willingly entered upon it. When I told him Pracontal's proposal, he smiled dubiously, and said, 'Why, it's a confession of defeat; the man must know his case will break down, or he never would offer such conditions.'

"I tried to persuade him that without knowing, seeing, hearing this Frenchman, it would not be easy to imagine such an action proceeding from a sane man, but that his exalted style of talk and his inflated sentimentality made the thing credible. He wants to belong to a family, to be owned and accepted as some one's relative. The man is dying of the shame of his isolation.

"'Let him marry.'

"'So he means, and I hear to Bramleigh's widow, Lady Augusta.'

"He laughed heartily at this and said, 'It's the only encumbrance on the property.' And now, Mr. Bramleigh, you are to judge, if you can; is this the offer of generosity, or is it the crafty proposal of a beaten adversary? I don't mean to say it is an easy point to decide on, or that a man can hit it off at once. Consult those about you; take into

consideration the situation you stand in and all its dangers; bethink you what an adverse verdict may bring if we push them to a trial; and even if the proposal be, as Mr. Attorney thinks, the cry of weakness, is it wise to disregard it?"

"Would you have laid such a proposal before my father, Sedley?" said Bramleigh, with a scarcely perceptible smile.

"Not for five hundred pounds, sir."

"I thought not."

"Ay, but remember your father would never have landed us where we stand now, Mr. Bramleigh."

Augustus winced under this remark, but said nothing.

"If the case be what you think it, Sedley," said he at last, "this is a noble offer."

"So say I."

"There is much to think over in it. If I stood alone here, and if my own were the only interests involved, I think—that is, I hope—I know what answer I should give; but there are others. You have seen my sister: you thought she looked thin and delicate—and she may well do so, her cares overtax her strength; and my poor brother, too, that fine-hearted fellow, what is to become of *him?* And yet, Sedley," cried he suddenly, "if either of them were to suspect that this—this—what shall I call it?—this arrangement—stood on no basis of right, but was simply an act of generous forbearance, I'd stake my life on it, they'd refuse it."

"You must not consult *them*, then, that's clear."

"But I will not decide till I do so."

"Oh, for five minutes—only five minutes—of your poor father's strong sense and sound intellect, and I might send off my telegram to-night!" And with this speech, delivered slowly and determinately, the old man arose, took his bedroom candle, and walked away.

CHAPTER LXIV.

A FIRST GLEAM OF LIGHT.

After a sleepless, anxious night, in which he canvassed all that Sedley had told him, Bramleigh presented himself at Jack's bedside as the day was breaking. Though the sailor was not worldly wise, nor endowed with much knowledge of life, he had, as Augustus knew, a rough-and-ready judgment which, allied to a spirit of high honour, rarely failed in detecting that course which in the long run proved best. Jack, too, was no casuist, no hair-splitter; he took wide, commonplace views, and in this way was sure to do what nine out of ten ordinary men would approve of, and this was the sort of counsel that Bramleigh now desired to set side by side with his own deeply considered opinion.

Jack listened attentively to his brother's explanation, not once interrupting him by a word or a question till he had finished, and then, laying his hand gently on the other's, said, "You know well, Gusty, that you couldn't do this."

"I thought you would say so, Jack."

"You'd be a fool to part with what you owned, or a knave to sell what did not belong to you."

"My own judgment precisely."

"I'd not bother myself then with Sedley's pros and cons, nor entertain the question about saving what one could out of the wreck. If you haven't a right to a plank in the ship, you have no right to her because she is on the rocks. Say 'No,' Gusty: say 'No' at once."

"It would be at best a compromise on the life of one man, for Pracontal's son, if he should leave one, could revive the claim."

"Don't let us go so far, Gusty. Let us deal with the case as it stands before us. Say 'No,' and have done with the matter at once."

Augustus leaned his head between his hands, and fell into a deep vein of thought.

"You've had your trial of humble fortune now, Gusty," continued Jack, "and I don't see that it has soured you; I see no signs of fretting or irritability about you, old fellow;

I'll even say that I never remember you jollier or heartier. Isn't it true, this sort of life has no terror for you?"

"Think of Nelly, Jack."

"Nelly is better able to brave hard fortune than either of us. She never was spoiled when we were rich, and she had no pretensions to lay down when we became poor."

"And yourself, my poor fellow? I've had many a plan of what I meant by you."

"Never waste a thought about me. I'll buy a trabaccolo. They're the handiest coasting craft that ever sailed; and I'll see if the fruit-trade in the Levant won't feed me, and we'll live here, Gusty, all together. Come now, tell me frankly, would you exchange that for Castello, if you had to go back there and live alone—eh?"

"I'll not say I would; but——"

"There's no 'but;' the thing is clear and plain enough. This place wouldn't suit Marion or Temple; but they'll not try it. Take my word for it, of all our fine acquaintances, not one will ever come down here to see how we bear our reduced lot in life. We'll start fresh in the race, and we'll talk of long ago and our grand times without a touch of repining."

"I'm quite ready to try it, Jack."

"That's well said," said he, grasping his hand, and pressing it affectionately. "And you'll say 'No' to this offer? I knew you would. Not but the Frenchman is a fine fellow, Gusty. I didn't believe it was in his nation to behave as nobly; for, mark you, I have no doubts, no misgivings about his motives. I'd say all was honest and above board in his offer."

"I join you in that opinion, Jack; and one of these days I hope to tell him so."

"That's the way to fight the battle of life," cried the sailor, enthusiastically. "Stand by your guns manfully, and, if you're beaten, haul down your flag in all honour to the fellow who has been able to thrash you. The more you respect *him*, the higher you esteem yourself. Get rid of that old lawyer as soon as you can, Gusty; he's not a pleasant fellow, and we all want Cutty back again."

"Sedley will only be too glad to escape; he's not in love with our barbarism."

"I'm to breakfast with Cutty this morning. I was nigh forgetting it. I hope I may tell him that his term of banishment is nearly over."

"I imagine Sedley will not remain beyond to-morrow."

"That will be grand news for Cutty, for he can't bear solitude. He says himself he'd rather be in the Marshalsea with plenty of companions, than be a king and have no associates. By the way, am I at liberty to tell him about this offer of Pracontal's? He knows the whole history, and the man too."

"Tell him if you like. The Frenchman is a favourite with him, and this will be another reason for thinking well of him."

"That's the way to live, Gusty. Keep the ship's company in good humour, and the voyage will be all the happier."

After a few words they parted, Augustus to prepare a formal reply to his lawyer, and Jack to keep his engagement with Cutbill. Though it was something of a long walk, Jack never felt it so; his mind was full of pleasant thoughts of the future. To feel that Julia loved him, and to know that a life of personal effort and enterprise was before him, were thoughts of overwhelming delight. He was now to show himself worthy of her love, and he would do this. With what resolution he would address himself to the stern work of life! It was not enough to say affluence had not spoiled him, he ought to be able to prove that the gentleman element was a source of energy and perseverance which no reverses could discourage. Julia was a girl to value this. She herself had learned how to meet a fallen condition, and had sacrificed nothing that graced or adorned her nature in the struggle. Nay, she was more lovable now than he had ever known her. Was it not downright luck that had taught them both to bear an altered lot before the trial of their married life began? It was thus he reasoned as he went, canvassing his condition in every way, and contented with it in all.

"What good news have you got this morning?" cried Cutbill, as he entered. "I never saw you look so jolly in my life."

"Well, I did find half-a-crown in the pocket of an old letter-case this morning; but it's the only piece of unexpected luck that has befallen me."

"Is the lawyer gone?"

"No."

"Nor thinking of going?"

"I won't say that. I suspect he'll not make a long halt after he has a talk with Gusty to-day."

And now Jack told in a few words the object of Sedley's coming, what Pracontal had offered, and what Augustus had resolved to send for answer.

"I'd have said the Frenchman was the biggest fool in Europe if I hadn't heard of your brother," said Cutbill, puffing out a long column of smoke, and giving a deep sigh.

"That's not exactly how I read each of them," said Jack, sternly.

"Possibly; but it's the true rendering after all. Consider for one moment——"

"Not for half a moment, Master Cutbill. That my brother might make a very good bargain, by simply bartering such an insignificant thing as his honour as a gentleman, is easy to see; and that scores of people wouldn't understand that such a compromise was in question, or was of much consequence if it were, is also easy to see; and we need waste no time in discussing this. I say Gusty's right, and I maintain it; and if you like to hold a different opinion, do so in Heaven's name, but don't disparage motives simply because you can't feel them."

"Are you better after all that?" said Cutbill, drily, as he filled Jack's glass with water, and pushed it towards him. "Do you feel refreshed?"

"Much better—considerably relieved."

"Could I offer you anything cooling or calming?"

"Nothing half as cool as yourself, Cutty. And now let's change the subject, for it's one I'll not stand any chaff about."

"Am I safe in recommending you that grilled chicken, or is it indiscreet in me to say you'll find those sardines good?"

Jack helped himself, and ate on without a word. At last he lifted his head, and, looking around him, said, "You've very nice quarters here, Cutbill."

"As neat as paint. I was thinking this morning whether I'd not ask your brother to rent me this little place. I feel quite romantic since I've come up here, with the nightingales, and the cicálas, and the rest of them."

"If there were only a few more rooms like this, I'd dispute the tenancy with you."

"There's a sea-view for you!" said he, throwing wide the jalousies. "The whole Bocca di Cattaro and the islands in the distance. Naples is nothing to it! And when you have feasted your eye with worldly beauty, and want a touch of celestial beatitude, you've only to do this." And he arose, and walking over to one side of the room, drew back a small

curtain of green silk, disclosing behind it an ornamental screen or "grille" of iron-work.

"What does that mean?" asked Jack.

"That means that the occupant of this room, when devoutly disposed, could be able to hear mass without the trouble of going for it. This little grating here looks into the chapel: and there are evidences about that members of the family who lived at the villa were accustomed to come up here at times to pass days of solitude, and perhaps penance, which, after all, judging from the indulgent character of this little provision here, were probably not over severe."

"Nelly has told me of this chapel. Can we see it?"

"No; it's locked and barred like a gaol. I've tried to peep in through this grating; but it's too dark to see anything."

"But this grating is on a hinge," said Jack. "Don't you see, it was meant to open, though it appears not to have done so for some years back? Here's the secret of it." And pressing a small knob in the wall, the framework became at once movable, and opened like a window.

"I hope it's not sacrilege, but I mean to go in," said Jack, who, mounting on a chair, with a sailor's agility insinuated himself through the aperture, and invited Cutbill to follow.

"No, no; I wasn't brought up a rope-dancer," said he, gruffly. "If you can't manage to open the door for me——"

"But it's what I can. I can push back every bolt. Come round now, and I'll admit you."

By the time Cutbill had reached the entrance, Jack had succeeded in opening the massive doors; and as he flung them wide, a flood of light poured into the little crypt, with its splendid altar and its silver lamps; its floor of tesselated marble, and its ceiling a mass of gilded tracery almost too bright to look on: but it was not at the glittering splendour of gold or gems that they now stood enraptured. It was in speechless wonderment of the picture that formed the altar-piece, which was a Madonna—a perfect copy, in every lineament and line, of the Flora at Castello. Save that an expression of ecstatic rapture had replaced the look of joyous delight, they were the same, and unquestionably were derived from the same original.

"Do you know that?" cried Cutbill.

"Know it! Why, it's our own fresco at Castello."

"And by the same hand too," cried Cutbill. "Here are the initials in the corner—G. L.! Of all the strange things that I have ever met in life, this is the strangest!" And he leaned on the railing of the altar, and gazed on the picture with intense interest.

"I can make nothing of it," muttered Jack.

"And yet there's a great story in it," said Cutbill, in a low, serious tone. "That picture was a portrait—a portrait of the painter's daughter; and that painter's daughter was the wife of your grandfather, Montague Bramleigh; and it is her grandchild now, the man called Pracontal, who claims your estates."

"How do you pretend to know all this?"

"I know it chapter and verse. I have gone over the whole history with that old painter's journal before me. I have seen several studies of that girl's face—'Enrichetta Lami,' she was called—and I have read the entry of her marriage with your grandfather in the parish register. A terrible fact for your poor brother, for it clenches his ruin. Was there ever as singular a chance in life as the re-appearance of this face here?"

"Coming as though to taunt us with our downfall; though certainly that lovely brow and those tearful eyes have no scorn in them. She must have been a great beauty."

"Pracontal raves of her beauty, and says that none of these pictures do her justice, except one at Urbino. At least he gathers this from the journal, which he swears by as if it were gospel."

"I'd call her handsomer in that picture than in our fresco. I wonder if this were painted earlier or later?"

"I can answer that question, for the old sacristan who came up here yesterday, and fell to talking about the chapel, mentioned how the painter—a gran' maestro he called him—bargained to be buried at the foot of the altar, and the Marchese had not kept his word, not liking to break up the marble pavement, and had him interred outside the walls, with the prior's grave and a monk at either side of him. His brushes and colours, and his tools for fresco-work, were all buried in the chapel, for they had been blessed by the Pope's Nuncio, after the completion of the basilica at Udine. Haven't I remembered my story well, and the old fellow didn't tell it above nine times over? This was old Lami's last work, and here his last resting-place."

"What is it seems so familiar to me in that name? Every

time you have uttered it I am ready to say I have heard it before."

"What so likely, from Augustus or your sister."

"No. I can answer for it that neither of them ever spoke of him to me. I know it was not from *them* I heard it."

"But how tell the story of this suit without naming him?"

"They never did tell me the story of the suit, beyond the fact that my grandfather had been married privately in early life, and left a son whom he had not seen nor recognized, but took every means to disavow and disown. Wait now a moment; my mind is coming to it. I think I have the clue to this old fellow's name. I must go back to the villa, however, to be certain."

"Not a word of our discovery here to any one," cried Cutbill. "We must arrange to bring them all here, and let them be surprised as we were."

"I'll be back with you within an hour," said Jack. "My head is full of this, and I'll tell you why when I return."

And they parted.

Before Cutbill could believe it possible, Jack, flushed and heated, re-entered the room. He had run at top-speed, found what he sought for, and came back in intense eagerness to declare the result.

"You've lost no time, Jack; nor have I either. I took up the flags under the altar-steps, and came upon this oak box. I suppose it was sacrilege, but I carried it off here to examine at our leisure."

"Look here," cried Jack, "look at this scrap of paper. It was given to me at the galleys at Ischia by the fellow I was chained to. Read these names, Giacomo Lami—whose daughter was Enrichetta—I was to trace him out, and communicate, if I could, with this other man, Tonino Baldassare or Pracontal—he was called by both names. Bolton of Naples could trace him."

A long low whistle was Cutbill's only reply as he took the paper and studied it long and attentively.

"Why, this is the whole story," cried he at last. "This old galley-slave is the real claimant, and Pracontal has no right, while Niccolo, or whatever his name be, lives. This may turn out glorious news for your brother, but I'm not lawyer enough to say whether it may not be the Crown that will benefit, if his estates be confiscated for felony."

"I don't think that this was the sort of service Old Nick asked me to render him when we parted," said Jack, dryly.

"Probably not. He only asked you to help his son to take away your brother's estate."

"Old Nick knew nothing about whose brother I was. He trusted me to do him a service, and I told him I would."

Though Cutbill paid but little attention to him, Jack talked on for some time of his old comrade, recounting the strange traits of his nature, and remembering with gratitude such little kindness as it was in his power to show.

"I'd have gone clean out of my mind but for him," said he at last.

"And we have all believed that this fellow was lost at sea," muttered Cutbill. "Bolton gave up all his papers and the remnant of his property to his son in that belief."

"Nor does he wish to be thought living now. He charged me to give no clue to him. He even said I was to speak of him as one I had met at Monte Video years ago."

"These are things for a 'cuter head than yours or mine, Jack," said Cutbill, with a cunning look. "We're not the men to see our way through this tangle. Go and show that scrap of paper to Sedley, and take this box with you. Tell him how you came by each. That old fox will soon see whether they confirm the case against your brother or disclose a flaw in it."

"And is that the way I'm to keep my word to Old Nick?" said Jack, doggedly.

"I don't suppose you ever bound yourself to injure your own flesh and blood by a blank promise. I don't believe there's a family in Europe with as many scruples, and as little sense how to deal with them."

"Civil that, certainly."

"Not a bit civil, only true; but let us not squabble. Go and tell Sedley what we have chanced upon. These men have a way of looking at the commonest events—and this is no common event—that you nor I have never dreamed of. If Pracontal's father be alive, Pracontal cannot be the claimant to your estates; that much, I take it, is certain. At all events Sedley's the man to answer this."

Half pushing Jack out of the room while he deposited the box in his hands, Cutbill at last sent him off, not very willingly indeed, or concurringly, but like one who, in spite of himself, saw he was obliged to take a particular course, and travel a road without the slightest suspicion of where it led to.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE LIGHT STRONGER.

"SEDLEY asks for the best Italian scholar amongst us," said Augustus the next morning at breakfast, "and the voice of public opinion calls upon you, Julia."

"You know what Figaro said of 'common report.' I'll not repeat it," said she, laughing, "and I'll even behave as if I didn't believe it. And now what is wanted of me, or my Italian scholarship?"

"The matter is thus: Sedley has received some papers"—here a look of intelligence passed between Augustus and Jack—"which he imagines may be of consequence, but being in Italian, he can't read them. He needs a translator——"

"I am equal to that," broke she in, "but why don't we do it in committee, as you political people call it? Five heads are better than one."

"Mr. Sedley is absolute, and will have but one."

"And am I to be closeted for a whole morning with Mr. Sedley? I declare it seems compromising. Jack frowns at me. There is nothing so prudish as a sailor. I wish any one would tell me why it is so."

"Well, the matter is as you have stated it," said Augustus. "Mr. Sedley says, 'Let me have the aid of some one who will not grudge me two hours, mayhap three.'"

"What if the documents should turn out love-letters?"

"Julia! Julia!" cried Jack, reprovingly; for in reality her sallies kept him in constant anxiety.

"I can't help it, Jack; I must be prudent, even if I shock you by my precautions. I repeat, if these be love-letters?"

"Well, I can answer so far," said Augustus. "They are not—at least I can almost assert they are not."

"I wish Nelly would go," said Julia, with mock seriousness. "I see Jack is wretched about it, and, after all, Mr. Sedley, though not exactly a young man——"

"I declare this is too bad," said Jack, rising angrily from the table, and then throwing himself back in his chair, as in conflict with his own temper.

"She *is* provoking, there is no doubt of it, and on board ship we'd not stand that sort of thing five minutes," said Julia, with a demure air; "but on land, and amongst terrestrial creatures, Master Jack, I know nothing for it but patience."

"Patience!" muttered he, with an expression that made them all burst out laughing.

"So I may tell Sedley you will aid him?" asked Bramleigh.

"I'm ready now. Indeed, the sooner begun the better, for we have a long walk project—haven't we, Jack?—for this afternoon."

"Yes, if we have patience for it," said he. And once more the laugh broke forth as they arose from table and separated into little knots and groups through the room.

"I may tell you, Julia," said Augustus, in a half whisper, "that though I have given up hoping this many a day, it is just possible there may be something in these papers of moment to me, and I know I have only to say as much to secure your interest in them."

"I believe you can rely upon that," said she; and within less than five minutes afterwards she was seated at the table with Mr. Sedley in the study, an oblong box of oak clasped with brass in front of them, and a variety of papers lying scattered about.

"Have you got good eyes, Miss L'Estrange?" said Sedley, as he raised his spectacles, and turned a peering glance towards her.

"Good eyes?" repeated she, in some astonishment.

"Yes; I don't mean pretty eyes, or expressive eyes. I mean, have you keen sight?"

"I think I have."

"That's what I need from you at this moment; here are some papers with erasures and re-writings, and corrections in many places, and it will take all your acuteness to distinguish between the several contexts. Aided by a little knowledge of Latin, I have myself discovered some passages of considerable interest. I was half the night over them; but with your help, I count on accomplishing more in half an hour."

While he spoke, he continued to arrange papers in little packets before him, and, last of all, took from the box a painter's pallet and several brushes, along with two or three of those quaintly shaped knives men use in fresco-painting.

"Have you ever heard of the painter Giacomo Lami?" asked he.

"Of course I have. I know the whole story in which he figures. Mr. Bramleigh has told it to me."

"These are his tools. With these he accomplished those great works which have made him famous among modern artists, and by his will—at least I have spelled out so much—they were buried along with him."

"And where was he buried?"

"Here! here in Cattaro; his last work was the altar-piece of the little chapel of the villa."

"Was there ever so strange a coincidence!"

"The world is full of them, for it is a very small world after all. This old man, driven from place to place by police persecutions—for he had been a great conspirator in early life, and never got rid of the taste for it—came here as a sort of refuge, and painted the frescoes of the chapel at the price of being buried at the foot of the altar, which was denied him afterwards; for they only buried there this box, with his painting utensils and his few papers. It is to these papers I wish now to direct your attention, if good luck will have it that some of them may be of use. As for me, I can do little more than guess at the contents of most of them.

"Now these," continued he, "seem to me bills and accounts: are they such?"

"Yes, these are notes of expenses incurred in travelling; and he would seem to have been always on the road. Here is a curious note: 'Nuremberg: I like this old town much; its staid propriety and quietness suit me. I feel that I could work here; work at something greater and better than these daily efforts for mere bread; but why after all should I do more? I have none now to live for—none to work for! Enrichetta, and her boy, gone! and Carlotta——'"

"Wait a moment," said the lawyer, laying his hand on hers. "Enrichetta was the wife of Montagu Bramleigh, and this boy their son."

"Yes, and subsequently the father of Pracontal."

"And how so, if he died in boyhood?" muttered he; "read on."

"'Now, Carlotta has deserted me! and for whom? For the man who betrayed me! for that Niccolo Baldassare who denounced five of us at Verona, and whose fault it is not that I have not died by the hangman.'"

"This is very important; a light is breaking on me through this cloud, too, that gives me hope."

"I see what you mean. You think that probably——"

"No matter what I think, search on through the papers; what is this? here is a drawing. Is it a mausoleum?"

"Yes; and the memorandum says: 'If I ever be rich enough, I shall place this over Enrichetta's remains at Louvain, and have her boy's body laid beside her. Poor child, that if spared, might have inherited a princely state and fortune, he lies now in the pauper burial-ground at St. Michel. They let me, in consideration of what I had done in repairing their frescoes, place a wooden cross over him. I cut the inscription with my own hands—G. L. B., aged four years; the last hope of a shattered heart.'"

"Does not this strengthen your impression?" asked Julia, turning and confronting him.

"Aged four years; he was born, I think, in '99—the year after the rebellion in Ireland; this brings us nigh the date of his death. One moment. Let me note this." He hurriedly scratched off a few lines. "St. Michel; where is St. Michel? It may be a church in some town."

"Or it may be that village in Savoy, at the foot of the Alps."

"True! We shall try there."

"These are without interest; they are notes of sums paid on the road, or received for his labour. All were evidently leaves of a book and torn out."

"What is this about Carlotta here?"

"Ah, yes. 'With this I send her all I had saved and put by. I knew he would ill-treat her: but to take her boy from her—her one joy and comfort in life—and to send him away she knows not whither, his very name changed, is more than I believed possible. She says that Niccolo has been to England, and found means to obtain money from M. B.'"

"Montagu Bramleigh," muttered Sedley; but she read on:—

"'This is too base; but it explains why he stole all the letters in poor Enrichetta's box, and the papers that told of her marriage.'"

"Are we on the track now?" cried the old lawyer triumphantly. "This Baldassare was the father of the claimant, clearly enough. Enrichetta's child died, and the sister's husband substituted himself in his place."

"But this Niccolo who married Carlotta," said Julia, "must have been many years older than Enrichetta's son would have been had he lived."

"Who was to detect that? Don't you see that he never made personal application to the Bramleighs. He only addressed them by letter, which, knowing all Enrichetta's story, he could do without risk or danger. Kelson couldn't have been aware of this," muttered he; "but he had some misgivings—what were they?"

While the lawyer sat in deep thought, his face buried in his hands, Julia hurriedly turned over the papers. There were constant references to Carlotta's boy, whom the old man seemed to have loved tenderly; and different jottings showed how he had kept his birthday, which fell on the 4th of August. He was born at Zurich, where Baldassare worked as a watchmaker, his trade being, however, a mere mask to conceal his real occupation, that of conspirator.

"No," said Sedley, raising his head at last, "Kelson knew nothing of it. I'm certain he did not. It was a cleverly planned scheme throughout; and all the more so by suffering a whole generation to lapse before litigating the claim."

"But what is this here?" cried Julia, eagerly. "It is only a fragment, but listen to it:—'There is no longer a doubt about it. Baldassare's first wife—a certain Marie de Pracontal—is alive, and living with her parents at Aix, in Savoy. Four of the committee have denounced him, and his fate is certain.

"'I had begun a letter to Bramleigh, to expose the fraud this scoundrel would pass upon him; but why should I spare him who killed my child?'"

"First of all," said Sedley, reading from his notes, "we have the place and date of Enrichetta's death! secondly, the burial-place of Godfrey Lami Bramleigh set down as St. Michel, perhaps in Savoy. We have then the fact of the stolen papers, the copies of registries, and other documents. The marriage of Carlotta is not specified, but it is clearly evident, and we can even fix the time; and, last of all, we have this second wife, whose name, Pracontal, was always borne by the present claimant."

"And are you of opinion that this same Pracontal was a party to the fraud?" asked Julia.

"I am not certain," muttered he. "It is not too clear; the point is doubtful."

"But what have we here? It is a letter, with a post-mark on it." She read, "Leghorn, February 8, 1812." It was addressed to the Illustrissimo Maestro Lami, Porta Rossa, Florence, and signed N. Baldassare. It was but a few lines, and ran thus:—

"Seeing that Carlotta and her child now sleep at Pisa, why deny me your interest for my boy Anatole? You know well to what he might succeed, and how. Be unforgiving to me if you will. I have borne as hard things even as your hatred, but the child that has never wronged you deserves no part of this hate. I want but little from you; some dates, a few names—that I know you remember,—and last of all, my mind refreshed on a few events which I have heard you talk of again and again. Nor is it for *me* that you will do this, for I leave Europe within a week,—I shall return to it no more. Answer this Yes or No at once, as I am about to quit this place. You know me well enough to know that I never threaten though I sometimes counsel, and my counsel now is, consent to the demand of—N. BALDASSARE."

Underneath was written, in Lami's hand,—"I will carry this to my grave, that I may curse him who wrote it here and hereafter."

"Now the story stands out complete," said Julia, "and this Pracontal belonged to neither Bramleigh nor Lami."

"Make me a literal translation of that letter," said Sedley. "It is of more moment than almost all we have yet read. I do not mean now, Miss Julia," said he, seeing she had already commenced to write; "for we have these fragments still to look over."

While the lawyer occupied himself with drawing up a memorandum for his own guidance, Julia, by his directions, went carefully over the remaining papers: few were of any interest, but these she docketed accurately, and with such brevity and clearness combined, that Sedley, little given to compliments, could not but praise her skill. It was not till the day began to decline that their labours drew to a close. It was a day of intense attention and great work, but only when it was over did she feel the exhaustion of overwrought powers.

"You are very, very tired," said Sedley. "It was too thoughtless of me; I ought to have remembered how unused you must be to fatigue like this."

"But I couldn't have left it, the interest was intense, and nothing would have persuaded me to leave the case without seeing how it ended."

"It will be necessary to authenticate these," said he, laying his hand on the papers, "and then we must show how we came by them."

"Jack can tell you this," said she; and now her strength failed her outright, and she lay back, overcome, and almost fainting. Sedley hurriedly rang for help, but before any one arrived Julia rallied, and with a faint smile, said, "Don't make a fuss about *me*. You have what is really important to occupy you. I will go and lie down till evening;" and so she left him.

CHAPTER LXVI.

SEDLEY'S NOTES.

Julia found herself unable to come down to dinner, and Mr. Sedley had to confess that he had overtaxed her strength and imposed too far upon her zeal. "To tell truth," added he, "I forgot she was not a colleague. So shrewd and purpose-like were all her remarks, such aptitude she displayed in rejecting what was valueless, and such acuteness in retaining all that was really important, it went clean out of my head that I was not dealing with a brother of the craft, instead of a very charming and beautiful young lady."

"And you really have fallen upon papers of importance?" asked Nelly, eagerly; for Julia had already, in answer to the same question, said, "Mr. Sedley has pledged me to silence."

"Of the last importance, Miss Bramleigh." He paused for an instant, and then added, I "am well aware that I see nothing but friends, almost members of one family, around this table, but the habits of my calling impose reserve; and, besides, I am unwilling to make revelations until, by certain inquiries, I can affirm that they may be relied on."

"Oh, Mr. Sedley, if you have a gleam, even a gleam, of hope, do give it us. Don't you think our long-suffering and patience have made us worthy of it?"

"Stop, Nelly," cried Augustus, "I will have no appeals of this kind. Mr. Sedley knows our anxieties, and if he does not yield to them he has his own good reasons."

"I don't see that," broke in Jack. "We are not asking to

hear our neighbour's secrets, and I take it we are of an age to be entrusted with our own."

"You speak sharply, sir," said Sedley, "but you speak well. I would only observe that the most careful and cautious people have been known to write letters, very confidential letters, which somehow get bruited about, so that clues are discovered and inferences traced which not unfrequently have given the most serious difficulties to those engaged in inquiry."

"Have no fears on that score, Mr. Sedley," said Jack: "there are no four people in Europe at this moment with fewer correspondents. I believe I might say that the roof of this house covers our whole world."

"Jack is right there," added Augustus. "If we don't write to the *Times* or the *Post*, I don't see to whom we are to tell our news."

"George hasn't even a pulpit here to expound us from," cried Jack, laughingly.

"You have an undoubted right to know what is strictly your own concern. The only question is, shall I be best consulting your interests by telling it?"

"Out with it, by all means," said Jack. "The servants have left the room now, and here we are in close committee."

Sedley looked towards Augustus, who replied by a gesture of assent; and the lawyer, taking his spectacles from his pocket, said, "I shall simply read you the entry of my note-book. Much of it will surprise and much more gratify you; but let me entreat that if you have any doubts to resolve, or questions to put, you will reserve them till I have finished. I will only say that for everything I shall state as fact there appears to me to be abundant proofs, and where I mention what is simply conjecture I will say so. You remember my condition, then? I am not to be interrupted."

"Agreed," cried Jack, as though replying for the most probable defaulter. "I'll not utter a word, and the others are all discretion."

"The case is this," said Sedley. "Montagu Bramleigh, of Cossenden Manor, married Enrichetta, daughter of Giacomo Lami, the painter. The marriage was celebrated at the village church of Portshannon, and duly registered. They separated soon after — she retiring to Holland with her father, who had compromised himself in the Irish rebellion of '98. A son was born to this marriage, christened and registered in the Protestant church at Louvain as Godfrey

Lami Bramleigh. To his christening Bramleigh was entreated to come, but under various pretexts he excused himself, and sent a costly present for the occasion; his letters, however, breathed nothing but affection, and fully recognized the boy as his son and his heir. Captain Bramleigh is I know, impatient at the length of these details, but I can't help it. Indignant at the treatment of his daughter, Lami sent back the gift with a letter of insulting meaning. Several letters were interchanged of anger and recrimination; and Enrichetta, whose health had long been failing, sunk under the suffering of her desertion and died. Lami left Holland, and repaired to Germany, carrying the child with him. He was also accompanied by a younger daughter, Carlotta, who, at the time I refer to, might have been sixteen or seventeen years of age. Lami held no intercourse with Bramleigh from this date, nor, so far as we know, did Bramleigh take measures to learn about the child—how he grew up, or where he was. Amongst the intimates of Lami's family was a man whose name is not unfamiliar to newspaper readers of some thirty or forty years back—a man who had figured in various conspiracies, and contrived to escape scatheless, where his associates had paid the last penalty of their crimes. This man became the suitor of Carlotta, and won her affections, although Giacomo neither liked nor trusted Niccolo Baldassare——"

"Stop there," cried Jack, rising, and leaning eagerly across the table; "say that name again."

"Niccolo Baldassare."

"My old companion — my comrade at the galleys," exclaimed Jack; "we were locked to each other, wrist and ankle, for eight months."

"He lives then?"

"I should think he does; the old beggar is as stout and hale as any one here. I can't guess his age, but I'll answer for his vigour."

"This will be all important hereafter," said Sedley, making a note. "Now to my narrative. From Lami, Baldassare learned the story of Enrichetta's unhappy marriage and death, and heard how the child, then a playful little boy of three years or so, was the rightful heir of a vast fortune—a claim the grandfather firmly resolved to prosecute at some future day. The hope was, however, not destined to sustain him, for the boy caught a fever and died. His burial-place is mentioned, and his age, four years."

"So that," cried Augustus, "the claim became extinct with him?"

"Of course; for though Montagu Bramleigh re-married, it was not till six years after his first wife's death."

"And our rights are unassailable?" cried Nelly, wildly.

"Your estates are safe; at least they will be safe."

"And who is Pracontal de Bramleigh?" asked Jack.

"I will tell you. Baldassare succeeded in winning Carlotta's heart and persuaded her to elope with him. She did so, carrying with her all the presents Bramleigh had formerly given to her sister—some rings of great price, and an old watch with the Bramleigh arms in brilliants, among the number. But these were not all; she also took the letters and documents that established her marriage, and a copy of the registration. I must hasten on, for I see impatience on every side. He broke the heart of this poor girl, who died, and was buried with her little boy in the same grave, leaving old Lami desolate and childless. By another marriage, and by a wife still living, Marie Pracontal, Baldassare had a son; and he bethought him, armed as he was with papers and documents, to prefer the claim to the Bramleigh estates for this youth; and had even the audacity to ask Lami's assistance to the fraud, and to threaten him with his vengeance if he betrayed him.

"So perfectly propped was the pretension by circumstances of actual events—Niccolo knew everything— that Bramleigh not only sent several sums of money to stifle the demand, but actually despatched a confidential person abroad to see the claimant, and make some compromise with him; for it is abundantly evident that Montagu Bramleigh only dreaded the scandal and the *éclat* such a story would create, and had no fears for the title to his estates, he all along believing that there were circumstances in the marriage with Enrichetta which would show it to be illegal, and the issue consequently illegitimate."

"I must say, I think our respected grandfather," said Augustus, gravely, "does not figure handsomely in this story."

"With the single exception of old Lami," cried Jack, "they were a set of rascals—every man of them."

"And is this the way you speak of your dear friend Niccolo Baldassare?" asked Nelly.

"He was a capital fellow at the galleys; but I suspect he'd prove a very shady acquaintance in more correct company."

"And, Mr. Sedley, do you really say that all this can be proven?" cried Nelly. "Do you believe it all yourself?"

"Every word of it. I shall test most of it within a few days. I have already telegraphed to London for one of the clever investigators of registries and records. I have ample means of tracing most of the events I need. These papers of old Lami's are full of small details; they form a closer biography than most men leave behind them."

"There was, however, a marriage of my grandfather with Enrichetta Lami?" asked Augustus.

"We give them that," cried the lawyer, who fancied himself already instructing counsel. "We contest nothing—notice, registry, witnesses, all are as legal as they could wish. The girl was Mrs. Bramleigh, and her son Montagu Bramleigh's heir; death, however, carried away both, and the claim fell with them. That these people will risk a trial now is more than I can believe; but if they should, we will be prepared for them. They shall be indicted before they leave the court, and Count Pracontal de Bramleigh be put in the dock for forgery."

"No such thing, Sedley," broke in Bramleigh, with an energy very rare with him. "I am well inclined to believe that this young man was no party to the fraud—he has been duped throughout; nor can I forget the handsome terms he extended to us when our fortune looked darkest."

"A generosity on which late events have thrown a very ugly light," muttered Sedley.

"My brother is right. I'll be sworn he is," cried Jack. "We should be utterly unworthy of the good luck that has befallen us, if the first use we made of it was to crush another."

"If *your* doctrines were to prevail, sir, it would be a very puzzling world to live in," said Sedley, sharply.

"We'd manage to get on with fewer lawyers, any way."

"Mr. Sedley," said Nelly, mildly, "we are all too happy and too gratified for this unlooked-for deliverance to have a thought for what is to cause suffering anywhere. Let us, I entreat you, have the full enjoyment of this great happiness."

"Then we are probably to include the notable Mr. Cutbill in this act of indemnity?" said Sedley, sneeringly.

"I should think we would, sir," replied Jack. "Without the notable Mr. Cutbill's aid we should never have chanced on those papers you have just quoted to us."

"Has he been housebreaking again?" asked Sedley, with a grin.

"I protest," interposed Bramleigh, "if the good fairy who has been so beneficent to us were only to see us sparring and wrangling in this fashion, she might well think fit to withdraw her gift."

"Oh, here's Julia," cried Nelly; "and all will go right now."

"Well," said Julia, "has any one moved the thanks of the house to Mr. Sedley, for if not, I'm quite ready to do it. I have my speech prepared."

"Move! move!" cried several together.

"I first intend to have a little dinner," said she; "but I have ordered it in the small dining-room; and you are perfectly welcome, any or all of you, to keep me company, if you like.

To follow the conversation that ensued would be little more than again to go over a story, which we feel has been already impressed with tiresome reiteration on the reader. Whatever had failed in Sedley's narrative, Julia's ready wit and quick intelligence had supplied by conjecture, and they talked on till late into the night, bright gleams of future projects shooting like meteors across the placid heaven of their enjoyment, and making all bright around them.

Before they parted it was arranged that each should take his separate share of the inquiry, for there were registries to be searched, dates confirmed in several places: and while L'Estrange was to set out for Louvain, and Jack for Savoy, Sedley himself took charge of the weightier question to discover St. Michel, and prove the burial of Godfrey Bramleigh.

CHAPTER LXVII.

A WAYFARER.

When the time came for the several members of the family at the villa to set out on the search after evidence, Jack, whose reluctance to leave home—he called it "home"—increased with every day, induced Cutbill to go in his stead, a change which even Mr. Sedley himself was forced to admit was not detrimental to the public service.

Cutbill's mission was to Aix, in Savoy, to see and confer with Marie Pracontal, the first wife of Baldassare. He arrived in the nick of time, for only on that same morning had Baldassare himself entered the town, in his galley-slave uniform, to claim his wife and ask recognition amongst his fellow-townsmen. The house where she lived was besieged by a crowd, all more or less eager in asserting the woman's cause, and denouncing the pretensions of a fellow covered with crimes, and pronounced dead to all civil rights. Amid execrations and insults, with threats of even worse, Baldassare stood on a chair in the street, in the act of addressing the multitude, as Cutbill drew nigh. The imperturbable self-possession, the cool courage of the man—who dared to brave public opinion in this fashion, and demand a hearing for what in reality was nothing but a deliberate insult to the people around him whose lives he knew, and whose various social derelictions he was all familiar with—was positively astounding. "I have often thought of you, good people," said he, "while at the galleys; and I made a vow to myself that the first act of my escape, if ever I should escape, should be to visit this place and thank you for every great lesson I have learned in life. It was here, in this place, I committed my first theft; it was yonder in that church I first essayed sacrilege. It was you, amiable and gentle people, who gave me four associates who betrayed each other, and who died on the drop or by the guillotine, with the courage worthy of Aix; and it was from you I received that pearl of wives who is now married to a third husband, and denies the decent rights of hospitality to her first."

This outrage was now unbearable; a rush was made at him, and he fell amongst the crowd, who had torn him limb from limb but for the intervention of the police, who were driven to defend him with fixed bayonets. "A warm reception, I must say," cried the fellow, as they led him away, bleeding and bruised, to the gaol.

It was not a difficult task for Cutbill to obtain from Marie Pracontal the details he sought for. Smarting under the insults and scandal she had been exposed to on the day before, she revealed everything, and signed in due form a *procès verbal* drawn up by a notary of the place, of her marriage with Baldassare, the birth of her son Anatole, with the dates of his birth and baptism, and gave up besides some letters which he had written while at the naval school of Genoa. What became of him afterwards she knew not, nor indeed seemed to care. The cruelties of the father had poisoned her mind against the son, and she showed no interest in his fate, and wished not to hear of him.

Cutbill left Aix on the third day, and was slowly strolling up the Mont Cenis pass in front of his horses, when he overtook the very galley-slave he had seen addressing the crowd at Aix. "I thought they had sent you over the frontier into France, my friend," said Cutbill, accosting him like an old acquaintance.

"So they did, but I gave them the slip at Culoz, and doubled back. I have business at Rome, and couldn't endure that roundabout way by Marseilles."

"Will you smoke? may I offer you a cigar?"

"My best thanks," said he, touching his cap politely. "They smashed my pipe, those good people down there; like all villagers they resent free speech, but they'd have learned something had they listened to me."

"Perhaps your frankness was excessive."

"Ha! you were there, then? Well, it was what Diderot calls self-sacrificing sincerity; but all men who travel much and mix with varied classes of mankind, fall into this habit. In becoming cosmopolitan you lose in politeness."

"Signor Baldassare, your conversation interests me much. Will you accept a seat in my carriage over the mountain, and give me the benefit of your society?"

"It is I that am honoured, sir," said he, removing his cap, and bowing low. "There is nothing so distinctively well bred as the courtesy of a man in *your* condition to one in *mine*."

"But you are no stranger to me."

"Indeed! I remarked you called me by my name; but I'm not aware that you know more of me."

"I can afford to rival your own candour, and confess I know a great deal about you."

"Then you have read a very chequered page, sir. What an admirable cigar. You import these, I'd wager?"

"No; but it comes to the same. I buy them in bond, and pay the duty."

"Yours is the only country to live in, sir. It has been the dream of my life to pass my last days in England."

"Why not do so? I can't imagine that Aix will prefer any strong claims in preference."

"No, I don't care for Aix, though it is pretty, and I have passed some days of happy tranquillity on that little Lac de Bourges; but to return: to what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for the knowledge you possess of my biography?"

"You have been a very interesting subject to me for some time back. First of all, I ought to say that I enjoy the pleasure of your son's acquaintance."

"A charming young man, I am told," said he, puffing out a long column of smoke.

"And without flattery, I repeat it—a charming young man, good-looking, accomplished, high-spirited and brave."

"You delight me, sir. What a misfortune for the poor fellow that his antecedents have not been more favourable; but you see, Mr. ——"

"Cutbill is my name."

"Mr. Cutbill, you see that I have not only had a great many irons in the fire through life, but occasionally it has happened to me that I took hold of them by the hot ends."

"And burned your fingers?"

"And burned my fingers."

They walked on some steps in silence, when Baldassare said,—

"Where, may I ask, did you last see my son?"

"I saw him last in Ireland about four months ago. We travelled over together from England, and I visited a place called Castello in his company, the seat of the Bramleigh family."

"Then you know his object in having gone there? You know who he is, what he represents, what he claims?"

"I know the whole story by heart."

"Will you favour me with your version of it?"

"With pleasure; but here is the carriage, let us get in, for the narrative is somewhat long and complicated."

"Before you begin, sir, one question: where is my son now? is he at Rome?"

"He is; he arrived there on Tuesday last."

"That is enough—excuse my interrupting—I am now at your orders."

The reader will readily excuse me if I do not follow Mr. Cutbill in his story, which he told at full length, and with what showed a perfect knowledge of all the circumstances. It is true he was so far disingenuous that he did not confess the claim had ever created alarm to the minds of the Bramleighs. There were certain difficulties he admitted, and no small expense incurred in obtaining information abroad, and proving, as it was distinctly proved, that no issue of Montagu Bramleigh had survived, and that the pretensions of Pracontal were totally groundless.

"And your visit to Savoy was on this very business?" asked Baldassare.

"You are right; a small detail was wanting which I was able to supply."

"And how does Anatole bear the discovery?"

"He has not heard of it; he is at Rome, paying court to an English lady of rank to whom he hopes to be married."

"And how will he bear it; in what spirit will he meet the blow?"

"From what I have seen of him, I'd say he'd stand up nobly under misfortune, and not less so here, that I know he firmly believed in his right; he was no party to the fraud."

"These frauds, as you call them, succeed every day, and when they occur in high places we have more courteous names to call them by. What say you to the empire in France?"

"I'll not discuss that question with you; it takes too wide a range."

"Anatole must bethink him of some other livelihood now, that's clear. I mean to tell him so."

"You intend to see him—to speak with him?"

"What, sir, do you doubt it? Is it because my wife rejects me that I am to be lost to the ties of parental affection?" He said this with a coarse and undisguised mockery, and then, suddenly changing to a tone of earnestness added, "We shall have to link our fortunes now, and there are not many men who can give an adventurer such counsels as I can."

"From what I know of the Bramleighs, they would willingly befriend him if they knew how, or in what way to do it."

"Nothing easier. All men's professions can be brought to an easy test—so long as money exists."

"Let me know where to write to you, and I will see what can be done."

"Or, rather, let *me* have *your* address, for my whereabouts is somewhat uncertain."

Cutbill wrote his name and Cattaro on a slip of paper, and the old fellow smiled grimly, and said,—"Ah! *that* was your clue then to this discovery. I knew Giacomo died there, but it was a most unlikely spot to track him to. Nothing but chance, the merest chance, could have led to it?"

This he said interrogatively; but Cutbill made no reply.

"You don't care to imitate *my* frankness, sir; and I am not surprised at it. It is only a fellow who has worn rags for years that doesn't fear nakedness. Is my son travelling alone, or has he a companion?"

"He had a companion some short time back; but I do not know if they are together now."

"I shall learn all that at Rome."

"And have you no fears to be seen there? Will the authorities not meddle with you?"

"Far from it. It is the one state in Europe where men like myself enjoy liberty. They often need us—they fear us always."

Cutbill was silent for some time. He seemed like one revolving some project in his mind, but unable to decide on what he should do. At last he said,—

"You remember a young Englishman who made his escape from Ischia last June?"

"To be sure I do—my comrade."

"You will be astonished to know he was a Bramleigh, a brother of the owner of the estate."

"It was so like my luck to have trusted him," said the other, bitterly.

"You are wrong there. He was always your friend—he is so at this moment. I have heard him talk of you with great kindliness."

A careless shrug of the shoulders was the reply.

"Tell him from me," said he, with a savage grin, "that Onofrio—don't forget the name—Onofrio is dead. We threw him over the cliff the night we broke the gaol. There, let

me write it for you," said he, taking the pencil from Cutbill's hand, and writing the word Onofrio in a large bold character.

"Keep that pencil-case, will you, as a souvenir?" said Cutbill.

"Give me ten francs instead, and I'll remember you when I pay for my dinner," said he with a grating laugh; and he took the handful of loose silver Cutbill offered him, and thrust it into his pocket. "Isn't that Souza we see in the valley there? Yes; I remember it well. I'll go no further with you—there's a police-station where I had trouble once. I'll take the cross-path here that leads down to the Pinarola Road. I thank you heartily. I wanted a little good-nature much when you overtook me. Good bye."

He leaped from the carriage as he spoke, and crossing the little embankment of the road, descended a steep slope, and was out of sight almost in an instant.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

A MEETING AND A PARTING.

In the same room where Pracontal and Longworth had parted in anger, the two men, reconciled and once more friends, sat over their dessert and a cigar. The handsome reparation Pracontal had offered in a letter had been frankly and generously met, and it is probable that their friendship was only the more strongly ratified by the incident.

They were both dressed with unusual care, for Lady Augusta "received" a few intimate friends on that evening, and Pracontal was to be presented to them in his quality of accepted suitor.

"I think," said Longworth, laughingly, "it is the sort of ordeal most Englishmen would feel very awkward in. You are trotted out for the inspection of a critical public, who are to declare what they think of your eyes and your whiskers, if they augur well of your temper, and whether, on the whole, you are the sort of person to whom a woman might confide her fate and future."

"You talk as if I were to be sent before a jury and risk a sentence," said Pracontal, with a slight irritation in his tone.

"It is something very like it."

"And I say, there is no resemblance whatever."

"Don't you remember what Lord Byron in one of his letters says of a memorable drive through Ravenna one evening, where he was presented as the accepted? There's that hang-dog rascal that followed us through the gardens of the Vatican this morning, there he is again, sitting directly in front of our window, and staring at us."

"Well, I take it, those benches were placed there for fellows to rest on who had few arm-chairs at home."

"I don't think, in all my experience of humanity, I ever saw a face that revolted me more. He isn't ugly, but there is something in the expression so intensely wicked, that mockery of all goodness, that Retsch puts into Mephistopheles; it actually thrills me."

"I don't see that—there is even drollery in the mouth."

"Yes, diabolic humour, certainly. Did you see that?"

"See what?'

"Didn't you see that when I lifted my glass to my lips, he made a pantomime of drinking too, and bowed to me, as though in salutation?"

"I knew there was fun in the fellow. Let us call him over and speak to him."

"No, no, Pracontal; do not, I beseech you. I feel an aversion towards him that I cannot explain. The rascal poisons the very claret I'm drinking just by glancing at me."

"You are seldom so whimsical."

"Wouldn't you say the fellow knew we were talking of him? See, he is smiling now; if that infernal grin can be called a smile."

"I declare, I will have him over here; now don't go, sit down like a good fellow; there's no man understands character better than yourself, and I am positively curious to see how you will read this man on a closer inspection."

"He does not interest, he merely disgusts, me."

Pracontal arose, drew nigh the window, and waved his napkin in sign to the man, who at once got up from his seat, and slowly, and half indolently, came over to the window. He was dressed in a sort of grey uniform of jacket and trousers, and wore a kerchief on his head for a cap, a costume which certainly in no degree contributed to lessen the unfavourable impression his face imparted, for there was in his look a mixture of furtiveness and ferocity positively appalling.

"Do you like him better now?" asked Longworth, in English.

And the fellow grinned at the words.

"You understand English, eh?" asked Pracontal.

"Ay, I know most modern languages."

"What nation are you?"

"A Savoyard."

"Whence do you come now?"

"From the galleys at Ischia."

"Frank that, anyhow," cried Longworth. "Were you under sentence there?"

"Yes, for life."

"For what offence?"

"For a score that I committed, and twice as many that I failed in."

"Murder, assassination?"

He nodded.

"Let us hear about some of them," said Pracontal, with interest.

"I don't talk of these things, they are bygones, and I'd as soon forget them."

"And do you fancy they'll be forgotten up there," said Pracontal, pointing upwards as he spoke.

"What do you know about 'up there,'" said he, sternly, "more than myself? Are not your vague words 'up there,' the proof that it's as much a mystery to *you* as to *me?*"

"Don't get into theology with him, or you'll have to listen to more blasphemy than you bargain for," whispered Longworth; and whether the fellow overheard or merely guessed the meaning of the words, he grinned diabolically, and said,—

"Yes, leave that question there."

"Are you not afraid of the police, my friend?" asked Longworth. "Is it not in their power to send you back to those you have escaped from?"

"They might with another, but the Cardinal Secretary knows *me*. I have told him I have some business to do at Rome, and want only a day or two to do it, and he knows I will keep my word."

"My faith, you are a very conscientious galley-slave!" cried Pracontal. "Are you hungry?" and he took a large piece of bread from the sideboard and handed it to him. The man bowed, took the bread, and laid it beside him on the window-board.

"And so you and Antonelli are good friends?" said Longworth sneeringly.

"I did not say so. I only said he knew me, and knew me to be a man of my word."

"And how could a Cardinal know——?" when he got thus far he felt the unfairness of saying what he was about to utter, and stopped, but the man took up the words with perfect calmness, and said:—

"The best and the purest people in this world will now and then have to deal with the lowest and the worst, just as men will drink dirty water when they are parched with thirst."

"Is it some outlying debt of vengeance, an old vendetta, detains you here?" asked Longworth.

"I wouldn't call it that," replied he slowly, "but I'd not be surprised if it took something of that shape, after all."

"And do you know any other great folk?" asked Pracontal, with a laugh. "Are you acquainted with the Pope?"

"No, I have never spoken to him. I know the French envoy here, the Marquis de Caderousse. I know Field-Marshal Kleinkoff. I know Brassieri—the Italian spy—they call him the Duke of Brassieri."

"That is to say, you have seen them as they drove by on the Corso, or walked on the Pincian?" said Longworth.

"No, that would not be acquaintance. When I said 'know' I meant it."

"Just as you know my friend here, and know *me* perhaps?" said Pracontal.

"Not only him, but *you*," said the fellow with a fierce determination.

"*Me*, know me? what do you know about *me?*"

"Everything," and now he drew himself up, and stared at him defiantly.

"I declare I wonder at you, Anatole," whispered Longworth. "Don't you know the game of menace and insolence these rascals play at?" And again the fellow seemed to divine what passed, for he said:—

"Your friend is wrong this time. I am not the cheat he thinks me."

"Tell me something you know about me," said Pracontal, smiling; and he filled a goblet with wine, and handed it to him.

The other, however, made a gesture of refusal, and coldly said,—"What shall it be about? I'll answer any question you put to me."

"What is he about to do?" cried Longworth. "What great step in life is he on the eve of taking?"

"Oh, I'm not a fortune teller," said the man, roughly; "though I could tell you that he's not to be married to this rich Englishwoman. That fine bubble is burst already."

Pracontal tried to laugh, but he could not; and it was with difficulty he could thunder out,—"Servants' stories and lacqueys' talk!"

"No such thing, sir. I deal as little with these people as yourself. You seem to think me an impostor; but I tell you I am less of a cheat than either of you. Ay, sir, than you, who play fine gentleman, mi lordo, here in Italy, but whose father was a land-steward; or than you——"

"What of me—what of *me?*" cried Pracontal, whose intense eagerness now mastered every other emotion.

"You! who cannot tell who or what you are, who have a dozen names, and no right to any of them; and who, though you have your initials burned in gunpowder in the bend of your arm, have no other baptismal registry. Ah! do I know you now?" cried he, as Pracontal sank upon a seat, covered with a cold sweat and fainting.

"This is some rascally trick. It is some private act of hate. Keep him in talk till I fetch a gendarme." Longworth whispered this, and left the room.

"Bad counsel that he has given you," said the man. "*My* advice is better. Get away from this at once—get away before he returns. There's only shame and disgrace before you now."

He moved over to where Pracontal was seated, and placing his mouth close to his ear, whispered some words slowly and deliberately.

"And are you Niccolo Baldassare?" muttered Pracontal.

"Come with me, and learn all," said the man, moving to the door; "for I will not wait to be arrested and made a town talk."

Pracontal arose and followed him.

The old man walked with a firm and rapid step. He descended the stairs that led to the Piazza del Popolo, crossed the wide piazza, and issued from the gate out upon the Campagna, and skirting the ancient wall, was soon lost to view among the straggling hovels which cluster at intervals beneath the ramparts. Pracontal continued to walk behind him, his head sunk on his bosom, and his steps listless and uncertain, like one walking in sleep. Neither were seen more after that night.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE LAST OF ALL.

All the emissaries had returned to the villa except Sedley, who found himself obliged to revisit England suddenly, but from whom came a few lines of telegram, stating that the "case of Pracontal de Bramleigh *v.* Bramleigh had been struck out of the cause list; Kelson a heavy loser, having made large advances to plaintiff."

"Wasn't it like the old fox to add this about his colleague? As if any of us cared about Kelson, or thought of him!"

"Good fortune is very selfish, I really believe," said Nelly. "We have done nothing but talk of ourselves, our interests, and our intentions for the last four days, and the worst of it is we don't seem tired of doing so yet."

"It would be a niggardly thing to deny us that pleasure, seeing what we have passed through to reach it," cried Jack.

"Who'll write to Marion with the news?" said Augustus.

"Not I," said Jack; "or if I do it will be to sign myself 'late Sam Rogers.'"

"If George accepts the embassy chaplaincy," said Julia, "he can convey the tidings by word of mouth."

"To guess by his dreary face," said Jack, "one would say he had really closed with that proposal. What's the matter, old fellow; has the general joy here not warmed your heart?"

L'Estrange, pale and red alternately, blundered out a few scarcely coherent words; and Julia, who well knew what feelings were agitating him, and how the hopes that adversity had favoured might be dashed, now that a brighter fortune had dawned, came quickly to his rescue, and said, "I see what George is thinking of. George is wondering when we shall all be as happy and as united again, as we have been here, under this dear old roof."

"But why should we not?" broke in Augustus. "I mean to keep the anniversary of our meeting here, and assemble you all every year at this place. Perhaps I have forgotten to tell you that I am the owner of the villa. I have signed the contract this morning."

A cry of joy—almost a cheer—greeted this announcement, and Augustus went on,—

"My ferns, and my green beetles, and my sea anemones, as Nelly enumerates them, can all be prosecuted here, and I purpose to remain and live here."

"And Castello?"

"Jack will go and live at Castello," continued he "I have interceded with a lady of my acquaintance"—he did not glance at Julia, but she blushed as he spoke—"to keep a certain green room, with a little stair out of it down to the garden, for me when I go there. Beyond that I reserve nothing."

"We'll only half value the gift without you, old fellow," said Jack, as he passed his arm around her, and drew her fondly towards him.

"As one of the uninstructed public," interposed Cutbill, "I desire to ask, who are meant by 'We'?"

A half insolent toss of the head from Julia, meant specially for the speaker, was however, seen by the others, who could not help laughing at it heartily.

"I think the uninstructed public should have a little deference for those who know more," broke in Jack, tartly, for he resented hotly whatever seemed to annoy Julia.

"Tom Cutbill is shunted off the line, I see," said Cutbill, mournfully.

"If he were," cried Augustus, "we should be about the most worthless set of people living. We owe him much, and like him even more."

"Now, that's what I call handsome," resumed Cutbill, "and if it wasn't a moment when you are all thinking of things a precious sight more interesting than T. C., I'd ask permission to return my acknowledgments in a speech."

"Oh, don't make a speech, Mr. Cutbill," said Julia.

"No, ma'am. I'll reserve myself till I return thanks for the bridesmaids."

"Will no one suppress him?" said Julia, in a whisper.

"Oh, I am so glad you are to live at Castello, dearest," said Nelly, as she drew Julia to her, and kissed her. "You are just the châtelaine to become it."

"There is such a thing as losing one's head, Nelly, out of sheer delight, and when I think I shall soon be one of you I run this risk; but tell me, dearest"—and here she whispered her lowest—"why is not our joy perfect? Why is poor George to be left out of all this happiness?"

"You must ask *him* that," muttered she, hiding her head on the other's shoulder.

"And may I, dearest?" cried Julia, rapturously. "Oh, Nelly, if there be one joy in the world I would prize above all it would be to know you were doubly my sister—doubly bound to me in affection. See, darling, see—even as we are speaking—George and your brother have walked away together. Oh, can it be—can it be? Yes, dearest," cried she, throwing her arms around her; "your brother is holding him by the hand, and the tears are falling along George's cheek; his happiness is assured, and you are his own."

Nelly's chest heaved violently, and two low deep sobs burst from her, but her face was buried in Julia's bosom, and she never uttered a word. And thus Julia led her gently away down one of the lonely alleys of the garden, till they were lost to sight.

Lovers are proverbially the very worst of company for the outer world, nor is it easy to say which is more intolerable—their rapture or their reserve. The overweening selfishness of the tender passion conciliates no sympathy; very fortunately, it is quite indifferent to it. If it were not all-sufficing, it would not be that glorious delirium that believes the present to be eternal, and sees a world peopled only by two.

What should we gain, therefore, if we loitered in such company? They would not tell us *their* secrets—they would not care to hear ours. Let it be enough to say that, after some dark and anxious days in life, fortune once more shone out on those whom we saw so prosperous when first we met them. If they were not very brilliant nor very good, they were probably—with defects of temper and shortcomings in high resolve—pretty much like the best of those we know in life. Augustus, with a certain small vanity that tormented him into thinking that he had a lesson to read to the world, and that he was a much finer creature than he seemed or looked, was really a generously minded and warm-hearted fellow, who loved his neighbour—meaning his brother or his sister—a great deal better than himself.

Nelly was about as good as—I don't think better than—nineteen out of every twenty honestly brought-up girls, who, not seduced by the luxuries of a very prosperous condition, come early to feel and to know what money can and what it cannot do.

Jack had many defects of hot temper and hastiness, but on the whole was a fine sailor-like fellow, carrying with him through life the dashing hardihood that he would have displayed in a breach or on a boarding, and thus occasion-

ally exuberant, where smaller and weaker traits would have sufficed. Such men, from time to time, make troublesome first lieutenants, but women do not dislike them, and there is an impression abroad that they make good husbands, and that all the bluster they employ towards the world subsides into the mildest possible murmur beside the domestic hearth-rug.

Marion was not much more or much less than we have seen her; and though she became, by the great and distinguished services of her husband, a countess, she was not without a strange sentiment of envy for a certain small vicarage in Herts, where rosy children romped before the latticed porch, beneath which sat a very blooming and beautiful mother, and worked as her husband read for her. A very simple little home sketch; but it was the page of a life where all harmonized and all went smoothly on: one of those lives of small ambitions and humble pleasures which are nearer Paradise than anything this world gives us.

Temple Bramleigh was a secretary of legation, and lived to see himself—in the uniformity of his manuscript, the precision of his docketing, and the exactness of his sealing-wax,—the pet of "the Office." Acolytes, who swung incense before permanent secretaries, or held up the vestments of chief clerks, and who heard the words which drop from the high priests of foolscap, declared Temple was a rising man; and with a brother-in-law in the Lords, and a brother rich enough to contest a seat in the Lower House, one whose future pointed to a high post and no small distinction: for, happily for us, we live in an age where self-assertion is as insufficient in public life as self-righteousness in religion, and our merits are always best cared for by imputed holiness.

The story of this volume is of the Bramleighs, and I must not presume to suppose that my reader interests himself in the fate of those secondary personages who figure in the picture. Lady Augusta, however, deserves a passing mention, but perhaps her own words will be more descriptive than any of mine: and I cannot better conclude than with the letter she wrote to Nelly, and which ran thus:—

"Villa Altieri, Rome.

"DEAREST CHILD,—

"How shall I ever convey to you one-half the transport, the joy, the ecstasy I am filled with by this glorious news!

There is no longer a question of law or scandal or exposure. Your estates are your own, and your dear name stands forth untarnished and splendid as it has ever done. It is only as I bethink me of what you and dearest Augustus and darling Jack must have gone through that I spare you the narrative of my own sufferings, my days of sorrow, my nights of crying. It was indeed a terrific trial to us all, and those horrid stories of hair turning white from grief made me rush to the glass every morning at daybreak with a degree of terror that I know well I shall never be able to throw off for many a year; for I can assure you, dearest, that the washes are a mistake, and most pernicious! They are made of what chemists call Ethiops mineral, which is as explosive as nitro-glycerine; and once penetrating the pores, the head becomes, as Doctor Robertson says, a 'charged shell.' Can you fancy anything as horrible? Incipient greyness is best treated with silver powder, which, when the eyelashes are properly darkened *at the base*, gives a very charming lustre to the expression. On no account use gold powder.

"It was a Mr. Longworth, a neighbour of yours, whom you don't know, brought me the first news; but it was soon all over Rome, for his father—I mean Pracontal's—was formerly much employed by Antonelli, and came here with the tidings that the mine had exploded, and blown up only themselves. A very dreadful man his father, with a sabre-scar down the cheek, and deep marks of manacles on his wrists and ankles; but wouldn't take money from the Cardinal, nor anything but a passport. And they went away, so the police say, on foot, P. dressed in some horrid coarse clothes like his father; and oh, darling, how handsome he was, and how distinguished-looking! It was young France, if you like; but, after all, don't we all like the Boulevard de Ghent better than the Faubourg St. Germain? He was very witty, too; that is, he was a master of a language where wit comes easy, and could season talk with those nice little flatteries which, like *fioriture* in singing, heighten the charm, but never impair the force of the melody. And then, how he sang! Imagine Mario in a boudoir with a cottage piano accompaniment, and then you have it. It is very hard to know anything about men, but, so far as I can see, he was not a cheat; he believed the whole stupid story, and fancied that there had been a painter called Lami, and a beautiful creature who married somebody and was the mother of somebody else. He almost made me believe it, too; that is,

it bored me ineffably, and I used to doze over it, and when I awoke I wasn't quite sure whether I dreamed he was a man of fortune or that such was a fact. Do you think he'll shoot himself? I hope he'll not shoot himself. It would throw such a lasting gloom over the whole incident that one could never fall back upon it in memory without deep sorrow; but men are so essentially selfish I don't think that this consideration would weigh with him.

"Some malicious people here circulated a story that he had made me an offer of marriage, and that I had accepted it. Just as they said some months ago that I had gone over to Rome, and here I am still, as the police-sheet calls me, a 'Widow and a Protestant.' My character for eccentricity exposes me naturally to these kinds of scandal; but, on the other hand, it saves me from the trouble of refuting or denying them. So that I shall take no notice whatever either of my conversion or my marriage, and the dear world—never ill-natured when it is useless—will at last accept the fact, small and insignificant though it be, just as creditors take half a crown in the pound after a bankruptcy.

"And now, dearest, is it too soon, is it too importunate, or is it too indelicate to tell your brother that, though I'm the most ethereal of creatures, I require to eat occasionally, and that, though I am continually reproved for the lowness of my dresses, I still do wear some clothes. In a word, dearest, I am in dire poverty, and to give me simply a thousand a year is to say, be a casual pauper. No one—my worst enemy—and I suppose I have a few who hate and would despitefully use me—can say I am extravagant. The necessaries of life, as they are called, are the costly things, and these are what I can perfectly well dispense with. I want its elegancies, its refinements, and these one has so cheaply. What, for instance, is the cost of the bouquet on your dinner-table? Certainly not more than one of your entrées; and it is infinitely more charming and more pleasure-giving. My coffee costs me no more out of Sèvres than out of a white mug with a lip like a milk-pail; and will you tell me that the Mocha is the same in the one as the other? What I want is that life should be picturesque, that its elegancies should so surround one that its coarser, grosser elements be kept out of sight; and this is a cheap philosophy. My little villa here—and nothing can be smaller—affords it; but come and see, dearest—that is the true way—come and see how I live. If ever there was an existence of simple pleasures it is mine.

I never receive in the morning—I study. I either read improving books—I'll show you some of them—or I converse with Monsignore Galloni. We talk theology and mundane things at times, and we play besique, and we flirt a little; but not as you would understand flirtation. It is as though a light zephyr stirred the leaves of the affections and shook out the perfume, but never detached a blossom nor injured a bud. Monsignore is an adept at this game; so serious, and yet so tender, so spiritual, and at the same time, so compassionate to poor weak human nature—which, by the way, he understands in its conflicts with itself, its motives, and its struggles as none of your laymen do. Not but poor Pracontal had a very ingenious turn, and could reconcile much that coarser minds would have called discrepant and contradictory.

"So that, dearest, with less than three thousand, or two five hundred, I must positively go to gaol. It has occurred to me that, if none care to go over to that house in Ireland, I might as well live there, at least for the two or three months in the year that the odious climate permits. As to the people, I know they would doat on me. I feel for them very much, and I have learned out here the true chords their natures respond to. What do you say to this plan? Would it not be ecstasy if you agreed to share it? The cheapness of Ireland is a proverb. I had a grand-uncle who once was Viceroy there, and his letters show that he only spent a third of his official income.

"I'd like to do this, too, if I only knew what my official income was. Ask Gusty this question, and kiss every one that ought to be kissed, and give them loves innumerable, and believe me ever your

"Doating mamma (or mamina, that's prettier),

"Augusta Bramleigh.

"I shall write to Marion to-morrow. It will not be as easy a task as this letter; but I have done even more difficult ones. So they are saying now that Culduff's promotion was a mere mistake; that there never was such a man as Sam Rogers at all—no case—no indemnity—no escape—no anything. O dear me, as Monsignore says, what rest have our feet once we leave total incredulity?"

Woodfall & Kinder, Printers, Milford Lane, Strand, London, W.C.

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